

RUST
and
STARDUST



Rust and Stardust by mcplestreet

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Summary: The classroom door opened and a girl Mike had never seen before walked in. She did a once over of the room, her gaze landing on the free seat only a few feet in front of his own. Their eyes met and Mike's cheeks instantly started to burn, embarrassed that she had caught him starring. Mileven high school AU COMPLETE

1. Chapter 1: Mike

Hi guys! I hope you enjoy this mileven AU (I'm on a mileven binge bear with me if you've come here from my Harry Potter stories). Basically just a high school AU if Eleven never grew up in the lab and met the boys at school.

Mike Wheeler rushed into his homeroom class, heading straight over to his friends who were already in their seats. He sat at a desk next to Will Byers, setting his backpack on the ground. It was unlike him to be late, but he'd over slept after the batteries in his alarm clock died in the middle of the night. He skipped breakfast and went 5 mph over the speed limit just to get in at a reasonable time. His friends looked over at him as he settled into his seat, ignoring the look he was receiving from his homeroom teacher.

"Morning sleeping beauty." Lucas said, ruffling Mike's already messy bedhead. Mike pushed his arm away before trying to smooth his hair back down. "Nice of you to show up."

"Shut up." He said, both to Lucas and his other two friends who laughed at his lame joke. "My alarm clock died, it's not my fault."

Dustin rolled his eyes, "Only you, Mike."

Mike tried rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, leaning his elbows on the desk. The group was supposed to head to Benny's diner after school and Mike had volunteered to drive, so he could understand why they had been a bit antsy about him not showing up. Dustin and Lucas went back to the bickering they had been doing when Mike walked in as if nothing had interrupted them, Will and Mike looking at each other and rolling their eyes.

"They've been arguing all morning." Will told him, "Thank god you showed up."

Mike shook his head, "They've been arguing for 10 years."

Will laughed, opening up his notebook to the notes he had for a test

second period. While he looked them over Mike rested his chin on his hand, starrng towards the front of the room and letting himself zone out. He could still hear his friends voiced behind him as they continued to go back and forth.

The classroom door opened and a girl Mike had never seen before walked in, with a backpack hanging off her thin shoulders and a piece of paper in her hand. She walked up to the teacher and handed him the sheet of paper. All heads in the room turned towards her, no one recognizing her. The girl glanced at the classroom, noticing the looks she was receiving, bit the teacher seemed totally oblivious.

"Ah, you must be Jane, our new student." He said with a bright and teacherly smile spread across his face.

"Yes." She answered shortly. The girl was dressed in jeans and a flannel button up open on top of a grey t-shirt, with dark curly hair that reached her shoulders. Her eyes scanned the room nervously before looking back at the teacher.

"Welcome. Feel free to take any seat."

Her eyes did another once over of the room, landing on the free seat only a few feet in front of Mike. She walked across the room, her hair falling in her face as she attempted to keep her head down. Mike's eyes followed her as she neared the chair in front of him, where sunk down once she reached it. His eyes were glued on the back of her head, unable to look away. A few moments passed and he continued to stare. Sitting up slightly, the girl turned in her chair and glanced at him over her shoulder.

Their eyes met and Mike's cheeks instantly started to burn, embarrassed that she had caught him starrng. He tore his eyes away from her, looking down at his hands. Mike waited for 10 seconds to pass before looking back up at her, surprised to see she was still looking back at him. Once their eyes met a second time she quickly turned back in her chair and faced forward once again.

Lucas bumped his shoulder with his arm, grabbing Mike's attention once again. "Mike, chill with the heart eyes. You're not nearly as subtle as you think."

"Shut up." He said, his cheeks going hot once again.

"Forget it, man." Dustin told him, glancing at the girl in front of them. "She's way out of your league. You always aim too high."

Mike shoved Dustin lightly, "Would you guys stop?" He said, "She's sitting like 7 feet away." The last thing he wanted was for her to overhear the conversation after she caught him starrng at her.

None of them made any other comments, but they all looked over at the girl as she rolled up the sleeves of her flannel shirt. While most of the other girls in school dressed girly and feminine this girl, Jane, looked like a total tomboy. It was a refreshing change. Mike could already feel an intense curiosity about this girl starting to stir in the back of his mind.

2. Chapter 2: Mike

Chapter 2! I don't think I have a single multi chapter story on my page, so it's about time. Ive also decided I'm going to reply to comments at the beginning of every chapter

Guest: I will likely be uploading every once in awhile. I'm on winter break right now for a month so I'll upload frequently for the month of January, and try to stock up on chapters for when I go back to school

Walking into his third period English class Mike took his usual seat by the window, placing his backpack on the empty seat next to him. Since he didn't have any friends in the class he was thankful he ended up with the empty chair next to him. Everyone else in the room had a partner sitting next to them at their table, but Mike preferred working alone anyway. He pulled out his notebook and pen, opening up to the next empty page before resting his chin on his hand.

Mike was still groggy from sleeping in too late, causing him to zone out once again. In the past two classes he'd had trouble keeping his eyes open so he doubted this one would be much different. He made a mental note to stop at Melvald's to get more batteries so the same thing didn't happen the next day.

"Can I sit here?" A voice asked, snapping him out of his trance

Mike looked up to find the girl from homeroom standing next to the chair next to him. He nodded, picking his backpack up and dropping it on the floor to make the chair free. "Yeah, sure." He said

She pulled the chair out before sitting down, hanging her bag off the back of the chair. Once she was sitting she folded up a piece of paper, likely her schedule, and put it in her pocket. Mike faced forward but watched her out of the corner of his eye. With her sitting next to him, only one foot away, he was even more curious about her. He tried to find something to say to strike up a conversation, but nothing that came to mind seemed good enough.

Mike chewed on his bottom lip as he wracked his brain for something

to say. Eventually he just went with the first thing that came to mind. "So," he said, "You're new?" Though as soon as the words came out he realized how lame they were. Obviously she was new.

She looked up, her eyes setting his again. "Yeah." She said, "It's my first day."

He nodded, thankful she didn't seem bothered by his lame question. "Where did you go to school before here?"

She shifted in her chair slightly, "I just moved here from upstate, up by Carmel. I used to go to school up there."

"Oh, that's cool." He said. A few moments passed and the two were silent, both looking at each other while waiting for the other to talk next. Mike decided to break the silence first. "I'm Mike by the way."

A small hint of a smile appeared on her face. "Jane."

Mike returned the smile before she looked away, her eyes falling down to her hands in her lap. Her fingers pulled at a stray string on the sleeve of her shirt, her teeth biting on her bottom lip. Looking up at the clock Mike saw that there was still two minutes left before class started, meaning he had two minutes of conversation time left with her. He looked over at her again, "So when did you move here?"

She looked back up at him, "Over the weekend."

He nodded, "Have you gotten the chance to get to know the town?"

"No." She said, shaking her head. "We've been unpacking pretty much non stop for the past 3 days. We haven't really had much time to go out yet. But hopefully sometime this week."

"Well," he said, his cheeks already feeling warm, "If you ever want a tour of the town of something I could give you one. I mean, if you want."

The small smile returned to her face, "Thank you." She said, "That's really nice."

"No problem." He told her, "Just let me know whenever."

Inside his chest Mike's heart was pounding a mile a minute, so loud he wondered if she could hear it since she was sitting so close to him. He'd just asked a pretty girl to hang out outside of school. Not only that, but she sort of said yes. Out of the corner of his eye he glanced at her, his cheeks turning even warmer. Her eyes fixed on the table with a smile, just bigger than before, on her face. Mike looked away, unable to hold back a grin of his own.

xXx

After school Mike and his friends climbed into his car, each throwing their backpacks on the floor and putting the homework inside of them out of mind. After starting the car up Mike pulled out of his parking spot and started towards the exit. As they passed the front entrance of the school he spotted Jane getting into the passengers side of who looked like her mothers car before shutting the door. Mike let his gaze linger on her for a moment before driving away. Next to him Will turned on the radio, flipping through a few stations before finally settling on one of the few that wasn't playing an advertisement.

"Did you guys see Stephanie Hall today?" Lucas said from the backseat. "She was wearing a skirt three inches above the knee. I didn't know today was my birthday."

Will rolled his eyes, "Does she even know who you are?"

"Yes." Lucas said defensively

"Only because you spilled a test tube on her in science class last year." Dustin pointed out

The three boys laughed, knowing that it was true. In the back Lucas crossed his arms, pretending not to be bothered. "What about you Mike?" He asked once the laughter in the car had died down

"What about me?"

"Speaking of girls out of our league, did you see the new girl at all today?"

Mike hesitated before answering. He hadn't thought about if he was

going to tell his friends about his interaction with Jane. Though the bragging rights to successfully asking a girl to hang out would be nice he had a feeling that they would tease him relentlessly. "Yeah, I have third period with her."

Will looked over at him, his eyebrows high on his forehead. "And?"

Mike shrugged, "She sat next to me. Every other seat was taken."

"And?" Dustin asked, leaning forward

"What?"

Dustin shook his head, "Well did you guys just sit in silence or did you talk to her?"

Mike turned onto Main Street, where the majority of the stores in Hawkins were. Including Benny's, all the way at the end of the road. "Yeah, a little."

"Well?" Lucas asked, "What did you say?"

He shrugged, "I just asked her when she moved here and stuff like that. Nothing exciting, really. So you guys can relax."

"You're face is so red right now, man." Dustin teased, reaching from the front seat and trying to pinch his cheeks. Mike shoved his arm away before he could. "Aw, Mikey's got a crush."

Mike rolled his eyes, "Shut up." He said, "I do not."

"Yeah, keep telling yourself that."

Pulling into the driveway of Benny's and shutting the car off Mike looked back at Dustin in the back seat. "Keep talking and you won't have a ride home." Though no one said anything else as the four boys got out of the car none of them bothered to hide the wide, shit-eating grin they all wore. Mike walked inside, thankful when he heard Will start to complain about a test grade he'd gotten back. If he hadn't he was sure that they would have kept going for another five minutes, at least.

3. Chapter 3: Jane

phieillydinyia: You read my mind! I'm aiming to alternate between POV's every chapter so don't worry you'll see a lot of Jane

Wow third chapter already (not to mention the others I've prewritten), I'm kind of on a roll with this story. I low-key feel like I'm updating too often so maybe I'll slow it down. Also 22 followers on this story already? Thank you all so much for actually liking this story enough to follow it it means a lot :)

Jane chewed on her bottom lip as her mom drove her to her second day of school in Hawkins. They lived on the boarder of town so the drive was almost fifteen minutes, much longer than the drive to her old school. She lived close enough that she could have walked. But now she had to rely on her mom to drive her, at least until she got her own car. Jane had a license, but after buying a house she doubted her mom would have the money to buy her a car anytime soon. Though she still kept her fingers crossed, just in case.

Pulling up to the front of the school Jane hesitated to unbuckle her seatbelt and grab her backpack. Her mother reached over, placing a hand on her arm to stop her from getting out. When she looked over Jane was met with the same, sympathetic expression she'd been given since they moved. "Try and make some friends, okay?" Her mother asked, putting on an encouraging smile. "And don't be afraid to let you're true colors show."

Jane stared at her mother for a moment, unsure of what to say. Though she normally wasn't shy she found herself having trouble keeping her head up at the new school. She was surrounded by strangers who all knew each other. She'd never felt more out of place in her life. So she thought it was perfectly normal to be a little shy at first. But she did her best to smile at mer mom, who only wanted the best to her. "I'll try, mama."

"Good." Terry said, watching Jane climb out of the car. "I'll be here when you get out."

Shutting the door behind her Jane turned to face the building, walking up the front steps and going inside. As she walked through the halls she could still feel the other students curious stares as they passed her, but she refused to meet anyone's gaze. She pulled the sleeves of her jean jacket over her hands, feeling self conscious. The door to her homeroom class, thankfully, wasn't far from the front entrance.

When she finally made it she walked in, clearly earlier than she had been the day before. The room was half as full as it had been the day before which was a relief. As she walked to her seat she glanced at the boy who sat behind her, and next to her in English class. Just as she reached her chair he looked away from his friend, noticing that she had walked in. She quickly sat down, her back to him and her cheeks feeling warm.

Jane wasn't typically shy around boys. Then again she wasn't typically shy at all. And it didn't help that he was incredibly cute. She leaned her chin on her hand, glancing up at the clock. Jane was incredibly jealous that the boy, Mike, got to sit behind her. If their seats were switched she wouldn't have to turn around in order to look at him. She was perfectly in his line of sight, which she doubted was something he was happy about.

She turned in her seat, reaching down for her backpack. Though there was nothing in particular she was searching for she just needed the excuse to have a better view of him. Jane started looking through her bag, pulling out the planner she'd bought that was completely empty. As she sat back up she glanced over at him, surprised to find him already looking at her. She found herself unable to look away, her face feeling hotter and hotter with every second that passed. After an unknown amount of time passed she forced herself to look away, facing forward in her seat again.

With her back to him she let out a long sigh, not even realizing she'd been holding her breath. She'd never been so captivated by a boy, not to mention so quickly. So what was so different about him? About Mike? He was just another kid, wasn't he? Jane spent the rest of homeroom flipping through her empty planner, pretending to read all of the plans she had because she was an incredibly busy and social young woman. In reality she could count the people she'd talked to in

Hawkins on one hand.

The bell rang and it was off to first period she went. Math and Science were uneventful, which didn't come as much surprise. Without any friends it was likely nothing would be very remarkable. But walking into English she could feel butterflies before she even opened the door. There he was, sitting at the same table he had the day before with an empty chair next to him. With his head down, looking at the notebook in front of him, he didn't notice her walk in until she pulled the chair out. Which was totally fine since it gave her a whole twenty five seconds to look at him without being noticed.

Sitting down next to him she pulled out her own notebook and placed it on the table before looking over at him. He was already looking at her when turned to him, a smile growing on his face when their eyes met. A smile that was infectious and quickly transferred to her own. Looking away after a few moments she opened up her notebook to a blank page and clicked her pen.

"How was your first day?" He asked, bringing her attention back to him

"It was good." She said, "Pretty uneventful. Typical first day."

Mike nodded, "Well that's not bad." He leaned back in his chair, setting his pen down on the table they now shared. "Did you finish unpacking."

She shrugged, "Almost. Only 10 boxes left as apposed to 100." Jane shifted in her seat slightly, already feeling herself blushing. "But we still haven't gotten the chance to look around town."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Mike looked down at the table in front of him for a few passing moments. She waited for him to understand what she was hinting at, for some kind of realization to pass over his face. His eyebrows climbed up at his forehead before he met her eyes again. "Well I can show you around sometime if you want."

Jane's lips turned up in a grin, glad he'd gotten the message and she wouldn't have to spell it out for him. "That would be really nice."

Mike mirrored the smile on her face, "Okay, great. When are you free?"

"Oh, pretty much whenever." She said, "When is good for you?"

"What about tonight?"

Jane hesitated before answering. Though she wasn't expecting such last minute plans she didn't want to miss the opportunity to see Mike outside of school. And especially so quickly. Maybe she was closer to having a friend than she had thought. So she nodded, her smile returning. "Tonight works." She said, scribbling down her address on her notebook before ripping it out and handing it to him. "Here's my address."

He took it from her, looking down at the slip of paper, then tucking it in the pocket of his notebook. "Is seven okay?"

"Seven is good."

"Okay." He said, still smiling. "I'll be there at seven."

At the end of the school day Jane hopped into the passengers seat of her moms car, a wide smile on her face. She felt like pinching herself, the idea of the cute guy from homeroom picking her up in four hours seeming too good to be true. Her mom looked over at her, obviously taking note of the expression on her face.

"Good day?" She asked, pulling out of the parking spot

"You could say that."

4. Chapter 4: Mike

Keep Calm and Love Stranger Things: you'll have to read and find out ;)

Parked outside of Jane's house Mike could feel his heart pounding in his chest. The last time he'd been on a date was back in freshman year, and there had never been a second one. Was this even a date? He looked down at the slip of paper she'd given him, then back up to the house. Through a window, lit up by the lights inside, he spotted Jane walking past. His anxiety peaked at the sight of her.

Why, all of a sudden, was he so girl crazy? He felt like Lucas, but a little less vulgar. Mike had always known his chances with the girls in Hawkins were slim to none. He'd long ago given up on the hope of finding a girlfriend unless he went away for college. Girls in town hardly gave him the time of day. And they were snotty and superficial, besides. Once he realized it he didn't have much interest in them anymore.

But Jane seemed different. While other girls opted for skirts and make up she chose jeans and natural beauty. Plus she *smiled* at him, several times. And she'd agreed to hanging out with him, hadn't she? That was certainly different from other girls.

Mike took a deep breath and got out of the car. If he waited too long he would be late, which wasn't a stellar first impression. Once he reached the front porch he shook his hands out, hoping to cast aside his anxieties. It didn't work. He rang the doorbell, which he could hear echoing throughout the house. Moments later the door swung open with Jane standing in it's place.

"Hi." She said, stepping onto the porch and closing the door behind her. Just before it shut he caught a glimpse of who must have been her mother, sitting on the couch just a few feet away.

"Hey." He replied. But he had no clue what to say next. Should he tell her she looked nice (because she certainly did)? That he was happy she'd agreed to come? They both sounded wrong so he decided to say

neither. "All set?"

She nodded, "Yup."

The two of them descended the short staircase and approached his car on the curb. Mike opened the passenger door before going over to the driver's side and getting in. Once they were both in and had their seatbelts on he started the car and pulled away. Mike kept glancing at her out of the corner of his eye, not entirely convinced that she was actually sitting next to him. Though he was sure she hadn't thought much about agreeing to meet up with him he had been on cloud nine all day. He'd ended up telling his friends, unable to hold back the bragging rights.

"You can turn on the radio if you want."

Jane nodded and started flipping through stations for about a minute before settling on a rock station, the same one Will always put on. Mike couldn't help but be a little surprised, not expecting a girl to like that kind of music. He was starting to like her more and more by the second. Which was, needless to say, dangerous.

"Did you finish unpacking?" He asked, attempting to strike up conversation.

"Everything except for dishes and utensils, other than the ones we've already used." Jane said, looking over at him. "Only took four days."

He mirrored the smile he spotted out of the corner of his eye. It was a shame he was forced to focus on the road. "Why did you guys decide to move?"

She paused, hardly long enough to be noticeable. If he wasn't paying such close attention, hanging onto every word she said, he wouldn't have registered it. "We just needed a change of pace." She answered.

Mike nodded a few times. "That's cool." He said, "How are you liking it here so far?"

"It's nice here." Jane told him, still looking over at him. "I'm glad I'm finally getting the chance to get out and look around. Thank you."

"No problem."

Jane turned her gaze to look out the window as the houses that passed them as he drove. "How long have you lived here?"

Mike let out a short breath. "Forever. My parents went to high school here and they've lived in the same house since they got married."

"Wow."

As he pulled onto Main Street Mike looked over at her, "You wanna walk for a bit? So you can really see everything?"

She nodded, "Yeah, sure."

Mike pulled over into one of the few parking spots along the road, glad he'd found one quickly. They stepped onto the sidewalk and began walking along the road. He tried not to stare at her, but found himself looking over at her every couple of seconds. Her hair was now tied up, giving him a full and uninterrupted view of her face. She had ditched the jacket she had worn in school and switched to a pullover sweater with the sleeves pushed up to her elbows.

"Have you made any friends yet?" He asked, curious to hear any names she might mention

Instead she shook her head. "No, not yet." She told him, "Just you."

Mike could feel his cheeks going pink for what must have been the dozenth time since he met her. The fact that she already considered him a friend sounded too good to be true. But he decided not to question it. "I'm sure you'll meet more people soon." He told her, sure that she was looking to have more than one friend in the long run.

"Yeah, probably." She said, peeking into the storefronts that they passed by.

Down the road Benny's diner came into view, the parking lot less than half full. "Did you eat dinner already?" Mike asked her, "We can stop at the diner down the road if you're hungry."

"No I didn't. That sounds good."

When they finally reached the end of the street Mike held the door open for her then followed her inside. They took a seat at a booth by the window. As they walked through the restaurant he spotted a small group of boys on the football team sitting across the room. At the sight of Mike Wheeler alone with a girl, a cute one at that, they all stared for a moment. He pretended not to notice as he slid into the booth across from Jane but couldn't help feeling a small feeling of satisfaction.

xXx

Standing on Jane's porch once again the two teens faced each other, both full from the meal they'd finished awhile ago. They hadn't talked about anything really as they ate or while they drove around the rest of the town. Mike told her about the best and worst teachers and she shared a handful of stories from her old school. She laughed at the stupid jokes he made and looked at him in a way a girl never had before. Or maybe he was making that part up. He sure as hell hoped not.

"Thank you for this." She said, tucking a strand of hair that had fallen loose from her ponytail behind her ear. "I had fun."

"Yeah me too."

The two fell silent, both seemingly unsure of what to say. Mike had no idea how to say goodbye after a probably-not-date, having zero experience with the situation. So he waited for her to say something first, his eyes locked on hers.

Jane cleared her throat, her eyes flicking down for just a moment then meeting his again. "Okay. Well, um, I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, definitely."

Jane stepped towards the door while he headed towards the stairs. "Goodnight Mike."

"Night."

She opened the door, flashing one last grin before she shut it. Mike couldn't hold back a wide grin as he headed down the stairs and

started towards his car. His stomach had somehow transformed into a butterfly bush in the middle of spring. At any second he felt as if he would fly away. When he got in his car he spotted his expression in the mirror, totally unbothered by how much of an idiot he might have looked. His infectiously good mood couldn't be altered by anything for the rest of the night. With one last look at Jane's house he started his car up and drove off.

xXx

As soon as she shut the door Jane bounded up the steps and flung her bedroom door open. Rushing to the window and crouching down so she was out of view she got one last glimpse of Mike as he walked back to his car. She rested her arms on the windowsill and her chin on her arms, her brown eyes following his every move. The night had gone so well she kept wondering if she had fallen asleep before he picked her up and the whole night was a dream. But she doubted her subconscious would be able to come up with a night so wonderful.

Once he was in his car she stood up straight again, walking over to her bed and flopping down on her back. As she starred up at the ceiling she couldn't contain an ear to ear grin. She'd gone on a not-quite-date with Mike from homeroom who was too cute for his own good. He smiled with a shallow dimple when she talked, and looked at her when he thought she wouldn't notice. Though maybe her mind had fabricated that part. God she hoped not.

As Jane got ready for bed and did the two homework assignments she had she couldn't help thinking how excited she was for school tomorrow.

wow a rare chapter with more than one POV. I can guarantee this will hardly ever happen

5. Chapter 5: Jane

Okay guys I have a super important question, I need your opinion on where I should take this story. Do you want Mike and Jane to get together before the conflict of the story comes into play, or should the conflict prevent them from getting together? Please let me know what you think!

Usiel21: Oh my goodness thank you so much! Each and every review means the world to me, especially since they have been overwhelmingly positive!

Jane walked into the bathroom at the beginning of her lunch period, setting her backpack down on the ledge next to the window. She fished around for her lunch, packed up in a Tupperware. A few months back she'd seen a movie where a girl ate her lunch in the bathroom since she didn't have the courage to search for a table to sit at. At the time she had thought the girl was being silly, that it couldn't be that hard. Now she realized she was a genius.

Finally pulling her lunch out she set it down next to her, zipped up her backpack and slung it on one of her shoulders. She picked up the container and turned to head into a stall. When she turned she was face to face with a red haired girl who's eyes immediately landed on the lunch in Jane's hand. Looking back up at her face the girl raised an eyebrow at her.

"You're eating lunch in the bathroom?"

Jane's face instantly flushed, "I, uh..."

"You're new, right?" The girl asked, stepping towards her. "You're in my math class. Jane?"

She shifted her weight to her other foot, longing for the confines of the bathroom stall. "Yeah."

The girl held her hand out for Jane to shake. "I'm Max." Holding her container with one hand she grabbed the girls. "You can come and sit

with me if you want."

"Oh, I don't want to impose on you and your friends."

"I sit by myself." Max said, taking Jane's arm and leading her out of the bathroom. "I only have, like, two friends. And they both have fourth period lunch. It would be a nice change to have someone to sit with."

Jane followed her through the hallway until they reached the lunch room, which was so crowded she doubted there was a spare table for them. Max headed straight to the back of the room with Jane just a few feet behind. Sure enough in the back corner there was an empty table. The two girls sat across from each other and started to eat. The first few minutes were silent until Max looked up from her sandwich at her.

"Where are you from?"

"Carmel." She replied after swallowing the food in her mouth.

Max nodded a few times. "Why'd you move? Your dad get a job opportunity here or something like that?"

With her eyes cast down at her food Jane spoke as casually as she could; "My dad doesn't live with us."

A red eyebrow raised high on Max's forehead, "Your parents are divorced?"

"Not exactly."

"Mine are." She said, shrugging her shoulders as if it were no big deal. "That's why I moved here in eighth grade."

The girls were quiet again, each paying attention to their food. Jane let her gaze wander around the cafeteria, secretly wondering if Mike was sitting somewhere inside the large room or if he had lunch the period before. She finally spotted him about 20 feet away at a table with the three boys he sat with in homeroom. Her eyes lingered on him for a few extra moments, glad to have the perfect view for watching him undetected.

"Have you made any friends?" Max asked, forcing Jane's attention back to her.

Jane shrugged. "Sort of." She replied. "One. Maybe. We hung out last night and he showed me around town a little."

Max's face broke out into a cheeky grin. "Oh it's a he? Who?"

"Mike Wheeler."

She raised an eyebrow at her, "Really?" Max started to turn to peek at him but Jane put her hand on her arm to stop her

"No, don't." She begged, "What if he sees?"

Max scoffed, "So what? I'm not allowed to look around the room?" She watched Jane as her eyes nervously glanced over at him, her cheeks starting to heat up. "Oh my god, do you have a crush on him."

"No." The word came out sounding much more defensive than she intended

Shaking her head Max started to laugh. "You totally do." She said, fully facing forward again. "So you guys went on a date? How was that?"

"It wasn't a date." She muttered

"Yeah, okay." Max rolled her eyes

Jane set her plastic fork down on the table, frustration starting to creep in. "It *wasn't*."

"Oka-ay." Max said, holding her hands up. "But you wanted it to be a date, right?"

She let out a sigh. *Why is this girl so nosy?* she thought to herself. Someone as nosy as her was dangerous to keep around. But at the same time she had no one else to sit with, and no other candidates for a female friend. When it came to making friends Jane planned on taking what she could get, even if they were invasive and a bit obsessed with her love life already. "Would that be such a bad thing?"

"I mean I guess not." She said with a small shrug, "I just heard he's a little weird is all."

"Who isn't?"

Max grinned, "I guess you're right." She said, starting to eat again. "I guess if anyone's gonna date Wheeler it's gonna be the girl that eats lunch in the bathroom."

Jane's cheeks started to feel warm, "It was a temporary plan."

"Well your welcome for saving you from total social isolation."

She rolled her eyes, "Thank you."

But in reality she was grateful she'd ran into Max. Sure she was nosy but she didn't hesitate to invite her to her table. Plus she was nice. It didn't matter to Jane much that she was just a little too interested in her life already. She was just glad someone was showing some sort of interest in her, now two people.

6. Chapter 6: Mike

There are too many comments on the last chapter to reply to them all in the beginning of this one, which is *so incredible*. Thank you to every single person that has reviewed/favorited/followed this story. I didn't think it would do this well :)

Mike pulled back into the parking lot of the school a little over an hour after the last bell rang. He went all the way home just to find out he'd left a textbook he needed for homework that night in his locker. By the time he got back half of the parking lot had emptied out, most of the cars left belonging to teachers. Walking inside the building his footsteps echoed in the almost eerily empty hallway as he walked to his locker. On the bulletin board by the front entrance there were posters for both junior and senior prom taking up almost 50% of the board. It was only the second week of April yet the school was already trying to get the students excited.

The last school dance he'd been to was the Snow Ball back in middle school. Even back then he wasn't crazy about dances. He and his friends kept to themselves at a table as far away from the dance floor the whole night. School dances were for people who thrived socially. So needless to say the whole friend group found them to be more of a pain than anything.

Turning into the hallway where his locker was he spotted someone sitting on the floor with a book in their lap almost 30 feet away. He reached his locker, putting in the combination then taking the textbook he needed out. After closing his locker once more he squinted his eyes to try and make out who was down the hall. As if they read his mind they tucked their hair behind their ear. With her face now visible he instantly recognized Jane.

Mike started down the hall towards her, tucking his book under his arm. Despite his loud footsteps in the silent hallway she didn't seem to hear him coming. It must have been a pretty good book to have her so engrossed. When he finally reached her she didn't immediately look up, so he spoke to grab her attention. "Hey."

Her eyes snapped up from the book to meet his, obviously shocked that someone had come to talk to her. "Oh, hey." She said, folding down the top corner of the page she was on.

"It's kinda late." He pointed out, "What are you still doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

Mike held up the cover of his textbook. "I came back cause I left this here." He raised an eyebrow at her. "Your turn."

She shut her book, setting it on top of her backpack next to her. "My mom had a job interview today. Right now. I'm just waiting for her to be done and come get me."

"Do you want a ride home?" It was as if the universe had decided that he'd had enough bad luck with girls and decided to give him a break. A really good break. Could he be so lucky to have her in his car twice in one week? It had been two days since their not-date and he was still waiting for her to decide she didn't want to be friends with him.

"Oh, no, you don't have to." She said, "I'm fine with waiting, really."

Mike shrugged, "I know I don't have to. I want to." As soon as the words left his lips he wished he could grab them and shove them back down his throat. "I'm not going to just leave you here waiting for who knows how long. Come on."

Jane stared at him and he swore he could see the gears in her head turning as she tried to decide. Her eyes darted down to the book beside her, then up at the clock before meeting his again. She let out a sigh before pushing herself up onto her feet. "Fine. You promise it's not a big deal?"

"Promise."

She picked her backpack up from the floor and walked beside him through the halls to the front entrance. Mike noticed how she stood only inches away from him and couldn't help but wonder if she was aware of it or not. Jane looked over at him, glancing at the textbook under his arm. "Is that for Mr. Gordon's homework tonight?"

"Yeah." He said, "Why?"

Jane shook her head, "Nothing."

"No, what is it?"

She looked away, her face noticeably flushed. "It's just... I don't have the textbook. My mom and I are going to buy all my books this weekend."

"Oh." Mike handed her the book. "Here, you can read it in the car."

Jane took the book from him, her fingers brushing against his for a fleeting second. "Oh my god thank you so much." She said, looking at the cover of the book. "You really just saved me from a lecture tomorrow."

Mike laughed, "Yeah I heard Gordon's a pain."

"I've been here four days and he's already decided he doesn't like me."

They pushed the front doors open and headed towards the parking lot. Once they were in the car Jane opened up the textbook and flipped through the pages until she found the one she was looking for. Mike stayed quiet, not wanting to distract her from getting her homework done. Her house was a decent ways away from the school, giving him plenty of time alone with his thoughts.

What was it about her that drew him in so much? The more he got to know her, through their little talks before English class and dinner at Benny's, the more he was starting to like her. But what had him captivated with her from the very beginning, before they'd even spoken to one another. It seemed too cheesy to happen in real life and not in a chick flick. Was love at first sight even a thing in real life? Either way love definitely was not the word he would use. Infatuation seemed more appropriate.

For the first time in a long time he was beginning to like a girl enough to consider doing something about it. His whole life he'd held back from pursuing his emotions when it came to girls (with the exception of his first date, when he took a girl he didn't like all that much out to the movies. He just needed to say he'd been on a date).

But if he was already so taken with this girl in four days he couldn't imagine how head over heels he would be in a month. The only question was if he was going to have the guts to ask her out on a date. A real, unmistakable, date. If it were any other girl the answer would have been no. But he could already tell Jane wasn't like any other girl.

Pulling in front of her house he shut his car off. He expected her to hand the book back to him and thank him for the ride before getting out.

"You know, I didn't get the chance to finish reading." She said, looking over at him. "Maybe you could come inside and we could work on it together?"

Mike paused, admittedly surprised at the invitation. "Oh yeah." He said after a few passing moments, "Sure. That sounds good."

"Good."

She unhooked her seatbelt and stepped out of the car, Mike quickly catching up with her. For the second time that week he ascended the steps of her front porch, waiting while she dug her key out of her backpack. When she finally pulled it out and unlocked the door Mike followed her inside while an anxious knot started to develop in the pit of his stomach.

7. Chapter 7: Jane

Thank you to everyone that has left their input on where I should take this story, please continue to do so! It seems the majority of you want mileven before the conflict and your wish is my command. However you're going to have to wait a little bit longer ;) I have a few chapters prewritten and they may or may not have gotten already. That's all I'll say, my lips are sealed for now!

Jane sat at the head of her bed, a notebook in her lap and a boy in her room. *A boy in her room.* She tapped her pencil on her chin while he read from the textbook, doing her best to appear as if she were paying attention to what he was saying. But she was having an incredibly difficult time focusing on anything other than the fact that Mike Wheeler was sitting at the foot of her bed. He was too busy reading to notice her starring at him, which she was infinitely thankful for.

"The Great Depression lasting from 1929 to 1939, and was the worst economic downfall in the history of the industrialized world. It began after the stock market crash of October 1929, which sent Wall Street into a frenzy and wiped out millions of investors." He read, "It proved, if nothing else, that Hoover was one of the most useless presidents America had ever seen."

Jane laughed, "It doesn't say that."

"But it's true."

She shook her head, "Skip to the part the questions are on."

He flipped one of the pages and started skimming for the answer to the first question. Jane pulled her knees up and used them as a makeshift desk for her notebook, still looking at him out of the corner of her eye. It was totally unfair for one person to be so attractive. She would have to have a talk with his mother about his impossibly good genes and inquire where she could find some better ones for herself.

"Okay, I think I found it." He said, resting the book on his knee.

"Despite assurances from President Herbert Hoover that the crisis would run its course, things only got worse over the next three years. By 1930, 4 million Americans looking for work could not find it; that number had risen to 6 million in 1931."

Jane's ears perked up at the sound of a car door shutting outside the house. "Hold on a second." She said, hoping off the bed and darting to the window. Down in the driveway her mom dug through her purse for her keys as she approached the front door. Panic swelled in her chest, not knowing how her mom would react to coming home to a boy in her daughters room. She'd never tried it before. Jane looked away from the window to face Mike again. "My mom just got home. I'm gonna let her know I'm here really quick."

"Yeah, sure."

She walked out of her room, closing the door over just in case. Jane flew down the stairs in hopes of catching her mom before she passed by and saw Mike in her room. She found her standing in the living room, putting her keys in a dish on the coffee table next to the front door.

"Hi mama."

She turned, her eyes lighting up seeing her daughter standing in the doorway. "Hi honey." Terry said, coming over and giving her a quick hug. "Did you get a ride from a friend?"

"Yeah." She said, nervously glancing at the staircase, "We're working on some homework."

She smiled even wider, "Oh that's nice. I'm glad you're making friends already." Terry pulled off her jacket, putting it on the back of the couch. "What's her name?"

"... Mike."

Realization passed over her mothers face, "Oh." She said. Not a muscle in her face moved yet somehow it looked different. "This wouldn't happen to be the same friend who picked you up on Tuesday, would it?"

Jane shifted her weight from one leg to the other, "Maybe."

Terry nodded a few times, straightening up slightly. "Okay." She said after a moment. "You know, Jane, if you ever want to talk about boys-"

"God, mama, no." She interrupted. "It's not like that okay? He's just a friend, we're just doing homework. That's it."

Her mom narrowed her eyes at her, as if trying to read her mind and find out if she was telling the truth. After a few moments her face returned to her permanent smile. She sighed, putting a hand on Jane's shoulder. "Okay, okay. Have fun."

"It's homework." She said, heading back for the stairs. "It's not fun."

But as soon as she was out of sight she couldn't hold back a grin. Not only that she got away without too much interrogation, but because she knew what was waiting for her in her room. She pushed the door open then shut it behind her. Her mom had never said anything about her policy on boys and the door being closed so she decided to just go for it. Not like anything was going to happen, she thought to herself, she just wanted a bit of privacy from her caring but overbearing mother. Jane crossed the room and sat back down on the bed where she had been only a few minutes before.

Seeing that she was back Mike handed her his notebook. "Here." He told her, "I found the first answer.

"Oh, thanks." She took the notebook, paraphrasing his answer as she wrote it down in her own book. In her peripheral vision she could see him looking around the room. Suddenly she was self conscious of the way she had set everything up. Had she known she'd have a boy in her room her first week in Hawkins she would have put more thought into the layout.

"Have you made any more friends?" He asked, his gaze falling back on her

Jane shrugged, "Sort of." She admitted. "I sit with Max Mayfield at lunch now."

He nodded, "That's good." Mike said simply

She thought back to how Max reacted to her bringing up Mike the day before. Jane couldn't help but wonder if they had ever spoken before. She had said Mike was weird, and Jane couldn't help but wonder if she had come to that conclusion through a personal experience. Either way it likely have no affect on the way she was falling for him.

After about half an hour they'd manage to answer all of the questions for homework, leaving Mike with no reason to stay. Her heart sank slightly when he told her that if he missed dinner his mom would not be happy and that he had to leave. Jane walked him to the front door, relieved that her mom was nowhere to be seen once they got downstairs.

"Well thanks again for helping me." She said. Jane stood in the doorway while Mike stood on her front porch

"Yeah, no problem." He told her with a small shrug. "It was fun, for homework."

She grinned, "Yeah it was."

"Well I'll see you tomorrow." Mike said, starting towards the stairs. "Goodnight."

"Night."

Just as she had last time he left her house Jane bolted up the stairs and into her room to get one last look at him as he walked towards his car. She reached the window just in time to see him unlock the drivers side door with a smile on his face. Her cheeks flushed bright red at the sight, her face beaming. He disappeared once he got in the car, driving away a few moments later. Jane walked over to her bed, sitting down and starrng at the spot he had been only a few minutes earlier. She couldn't contain the excited expression which felt now permanently painted on her face. It wouldn't come as a shock if she died grinning because Mike Wheeler had smiled after leaving her house.

She heard a small knock on her bedroom door before it cracked open, her mom's head poking in. "How did the homework go?"

"Good."

Her mom raised an eyebrow at her, "Yeah, I can see that." Jane tried to straighten her face, but was painfully unsuccessful. Her cheeks ached as she tried to suppress the smile she wore. Her mom smiled even wider, "Well I'm glad you're making friends." She said, "I'm so proud of you, honey."

"*Mom.*" She whined. Terry held up her hands and walked back out into the hallway, leaving Jane alone with her thoughts once more.

She leaned back until she was laying down on her bed. Jane imagined Mike driving home, with the same wide smile on his face she had seen only minutes before. Seeing him grinning to himself as he stood outside herself was her first inkling that maybe, just maybe, he might feel a fraction of what she felt. Though she thought it was too good to be true she still couldn't shake the feeling that it was possible. It was possible, wasn't it?

8. Chapter 8: Mike

You guys are probably getting sick of me saying this but thank you to every since person that has read/followed/ and reviewed this story. Seeing reviews saying that my story makes you smile warm my heart and are the reason I have so much motivation to continue this story. Enjoy yet another chapter!

"Hey, Mike, look." Lucas said, nodding towards the front of the cafeteria. "It's your girlfriend."

Mike looked up from his lunch, almost instantly spotting Jane walking into the large room. She headed straight for a small table about 20 feet away where Max was already sitting. As the girl took her seat a smile spread on her face and the two started talking right away. Facing his friends again Mike shook his head and picked his fork back up. "She's not my girlfriend." He said, hoping his face hadn't started to turn as red as if felt.

"She's not?" Dustin challenged, his voice dripping with sarcastic surprise.

"No. She's not."

The three boys looked at each other, then back at Mike. He knew by the look on their faces exactly what was coming. "How many times have you hung out with her already?" Will asked

Mike shifted in his seat, his eyes still cast down on his lunch tray. "Twice."

"Twice in one week." Lucas corrected

Dustin laughed, "Not to mention you two are drooling over each other every day in homeroom."

He looked up, noticing how Dustin made it sound as if she was doing it too. 'You two' was an inclusive statement, and he didn't plan on missing a beat when it came to talking to his friends about Jane.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she's just as bad as you are. She's always looking at you when you're not paying attention. She's all like" Dustin rested his chin on his hand and batted his eyelash at Mike from across the table, making the other two boys laughed. He then looked over Mike's shoulder at the table where she and Max were sitting. "She's looking at you right now."

"Really?"

Dustin looked back at Mike, "Well not anymore. She saw me notice."

He leaned back in his chair, picturing Jane watching him whenever he wasn't looking. Mike also wondered how many times he had been oblivious to her paying attention to him. The thought made him suddenly self conscious that she had caught him doing something embarrassing. And if Dustin was right it may have been more often than he imagined. The idea seemed too good to be true that he couldn't bring himself to believe it. What if Dustin was lying just to mess with him?

"What's up with you?" Will, who was sitting next to him, asked. "You're usually not this girl crazy."

Mike shrugged, "I don't know." He said simply

"Yeah and why her?" Lucas asked. His words sounded harsher than he likely intended them to be, or at least Mike assumed so. "I mean she's cute, I guess. But she's kind of a tomboy."

He had to hold himself back from rolling his eyes at his friend. "Yeah, but I kind of like it. It works for her. And she's different."

"She must be since she's giving you the time of day."

Mike shoved his arm. "You're just jealous a girl is actually talking to me. Unlike you."

"Yeah whatever." Lucas said, seemingly unbothered by the comment. "But you better act fast or she might loose interest."

Though he pretended that his statement didn't get to him much Mike couldn't help but think about it long after. If Jane did actually feel similarly to how he did would she really lose interest if he didn't act on it? Would she end up like all the other girls at school who didn't give him the time of day? The thought made his stomach ache with worry. Even if nothing happened between them he still liked being friends with her. So the idea of her not even wanting to be friends with him was certainly not a pleasant one.

After school Mike met Will, who he was giving a ride home, in the parking lot. They hopped in his car, tossing their backpacks in the back seat before pulling out of the spot the car was parked in. As they passed the front of the school he spotted Jane walking down the steps with Max by her side. The two were too busy chatting to notice both Mike and Will, who had followed his gaze, watching them.

"So what is it about her?" Will asked once they drove away, bringing the conversation they'd had at lunch back up. "You're never like this with girls."

Mike shrugged, not entirely thrilled to be back on the topic. But if he was going to talk about it with any of his three friends it would have definitely been Will. "It was bound to happen at some point."

"Yeah I guess." He said, starting to flip through the radio stations until he found the one he always put on. The same one Jane had chosen when she was sitting in the passenger's seat. "I'm just wondering why her?" The words were not nearly as harsh coming from Will. As opposed to Lucas there was no sign of judgement in his voice. Just plain curiosity.

If only he knew the answer to the question.

"I don't know, really." Mike admitted. "I mean she's cute. Plus she's really nice. And she's funny. And I think she's really smart, too. She knew the answers to almost all the questions when we were doing homework."

Will raised his eyebrow at him. "Really?"

"Yeah, maybe she's a history nerd or something."

"Or maybe," Will challenged, "she just used studying as an excuse to hang out with you. You said she told you she needed your textbook?"

"Yeah."

Will grinned, "Maybe it wasn't the textbook she needed."

Mike scoffed, sure that he was reading way too much into the situation. "Yeah right." He said, rolling his eyes. "She probably thought she didn't know the answers as well as she did. That's why she asked me for help."

"Oh so *she* asked *you*?" Will asked, his grin only widening. "Well that changes everything."

He shook his head. "No, it doesn't."

"Yes it does." Will said, turning in his seat to face him. "She saw the homework questions and chose to pretend she needed the textbook so that she could invite you over. Girls are smart like that, they plot and scheme these kind of situations and then make you think that it was your idea."

He couldn't help but laugh. "Plotting and scheming? That sounds a bit dramatic." Mike told him. "And since when are you such an expert on girls?"

"Since I stopped trying to get one and tried to understand them instead." He said, facing forward again. "You should try that part sometime. It might help you with Jane."

Mike glanced at him for a quick second before looking at the road again. "I don't need help with Jane." He said. "Things are going fine. We're friends, and I'm fine with it."

"For now."

"Totally fine with it." Mike pulled into Will's neighborhood, easing up on the gas. "Why? Do you think I need help with Jane?"

Will paused for a moment or so, clearly thinking over his answer carefully before speaking. "I think that you're not planning on making

the first move. Or any move at all. Which you should definitely rethink."

"Yeah, well, what if you guys are all wrong about her?" Mike questioned. "What if she's not interested in me like that and you're just putting the idea in my head, then I make a move and it all goes to shit. Then what?"

He shrugged, "You won't know until you try."

Mike pulled in front of the Byers house, putting his car in park once he was in the driveway. Will reached into the backseat and grabbed his backpack, bringing it up to the front and setting it in his lap. "Look, what's the worst that could happen if you make a move on her?"

"She could never talk to me again."

Will shrugged, "If she's that discouraged by how you feel about her then maybe she's not the kind of person you want to be friends with in the first place." He said before opening the car door. "I'll see you later."

He shut the door and walked up to his house, leaving Mike alone with his thoughts. Could they possibly be right about Jane? Was he just blinded by his own feelings for her to objectively look at the situation? The thought didn't seem *too* outlandish. Mike turned the car back on and pulled out of Will's driveway, glad it was the weekend so he had some time to think about things.

9. Chapter 9: Jane

Happy New Year everyone! I uploaded this way later than I normally would but I had work today, but I promised myself I would continue to upload as often as possible for as long as possible! Hope you enjoy this :)

Sunday afternoon, after getting off the phone with Max, Jane headed for Benny's to meet her and one of her friends who were having lunch together. She decided to walk since it would only take about twenty minutes and the weather outside was warm enough that she didn't need a jacket. Besides she needed the time to herself to think. Not just about Mike and school and all the normal things teen girls worry about, but about the bombshell her mom dropped on her that morning before she went to work.

After sitting her down at the kitchen table and handing her a glass of orange juice she took a seat next to her. "Jane, I'm not sure how to tell you this..." she watched her mother shift in her chair, clearly uncomfortable. Before the words left her lips she could tell they wouldn't be good. "Your dad's getting out."

Jane's heart took an instant nosedive into her stomach. What did she mean? It had only been six months for gods sake! As soon as her mom left the house she locked all the windows and doors, then her bedroom door before she sat down on her bed. She could have sat there for hours, staring at the wall feeling totally numb, had Max not called her. Needless to say she was thankful for the opportunity to clear her head for a few hours.

As she walked through the streets of Hawkins she kept her eyes peeled for anything suspicious looking. Even thought her mother said he was "getting out" not just "out". The conversation she had with her kept replaying in her head.

"But it's not time yet! That's not fair!"

"We'll make it work, sweetie. I promise."

It was what she always said. *We'll make it work*. Jane had always believed her, that they would make it work. But after the news she'd gotten only a few hours before she was starting to think that maybe they wouldn't. It was just one obstacle after another. When would it end? All she wanted was for things to be *good*. For them to be *happy*. Was that too much to ask from the universe? Jane pushed her purse higher up on her shoulder, deciding to put the conversation out of her mind. Worrying and dwelling on it wouldn't help anything and would only make her feel worse.

Jane reached Main Street after a decent walk, thinking about her old friends from upstate and her new ones in Hawkins. While thinking about her friends back in Carmel was a little sad she was doing her best to keep in touch with them. She'd already spoken with her best friend on the phone twice since she moved, once they had made decent progress with unpacking. Jane called her the night of her not-date with Mike to tell her all about him and what had happened.

"Is he cute?" Her friends voice in the phone asked

"Impossibly cute." She answered, laying on her bed only an hour after he left. "I think he might be a robot or something, there's no way a human could look so perfect."

"Wow."

Jane rolled onto her back, her head hanging off the side of her bed. "And he's funny. In a dorky sort of way, but it only makes him cuter. And he drives, which is a plus."

"What kind of car does he have?"

"God, Kelly, I don't know." Jane said. "You know I don't know anything about cars."

"If you don't ask him out soon I'm going to drive down there and do it for you."

She rolled her eyes despite the wide grin on her face. "That won't scare him off at all."

The diner appeared down at the end of the road, where she had been

on only a few days before. She walked by all the stores she had seen with Mike, butterflies starting to form at the thought of their night together. Every time she thought about him she was surprised with herself at how much she liked him. She'd only known him for 6 days and she was already telling her friends about him and turning into a blushing mess whenever she talked about him.

Walking into the diner Jane spotted Max sitting at a table against the window. She was sat next to a girl with blonde hair and fair skin, both of them with menus in front of them. Though the other girl looked familiar she wasn't entirely sure where she had seen her. She'd probably passed her in the hallways sometime that week. Jane slid into the booth across from them, the two girls looking up when she did.

"Hey, there you are." Max said, setting her menu down. "Did you walk here?"

Jane shrugged, "Yeah, but I don't live too far away."

"Okay." She said, thought she didn't seemed too thrilled with the idea. Max looked between the two girls. "This is my friend Lizzie."

The girl, Lizzie, looked at Jane across the table. "I think we have history together." She said, "Sixth period, Mr. Andrews right?"

"Yeah. It's nice to meet you."

Jane picked up her menu, starting to look through the lunch options. The booth was silent as the three tried to decide on what to order. Only a few other booths in the diner were filled, mostly with elderly couples or parents with small children. Across the room a little girl was fussing over the vegetables her mom was trying to get her to eat. The small and whiny voice made Jane smile to herself as she read the menu. A few minutes later a waitress came over and took their orders.

"So," Lizzie said, taking a sip of water after the waitress walked away. "Max told me you went on a date with Wheeler."

Her face burned bright red and she sent halfhearted glare towards

Max. "Why would you tell someone that? That was supposed to be private."

She shrugged. "We needed something to talk about while we waited for you."

"First of all, it wasn't a date." Jane said, looking back at Lizzie who wore a small grin. "Second of all why does everyone think it's such a big deal? He was just showing me around town a little bit. We're friends."

"It wouldn't be a big deal if you guys only hung out the one time. But it wasn't just one time." Max leaned her elbows on the table. "Didn't you guys *study* two days later?"

Jane rolled her eyes at the air quotes Max used and the way she said the word 'study'. As if they did anything else and she was keeping juicy secrets. "We did study. I needed his textbook."

"Bet that's not all you needed." Lizzie muttered, her smile even wider than before.

Though she tried to look annoyed Jane couldn't help but crack a smile of her own. It didn't help that Max burst out laughing. After a few moments all three of them were a giggling mess, earning a sideways glance from the elderly couple a few tables away. It felt good to be out and having fun after spending the majority of the week cooped up inside and unpacking everything she owned. Plus even if they were embarrassing her it had completely taken her mind off of what her mom had told her that morning. In the week she'd been at Hawkins she missed having girlfriends who she could talk about girl things with. Mike was a great friend but she doubted he would want to talk about hair and makeup (even though Jane wasn't particularly interested in those things to begin with).

"I have to know," Lizzie said once their laughter died down, which had taken a few minutes. "Why Wheeler? There's more than 150 boys in the grade, triple that in the whole school. So why choose him?"

Jane sighed quietly. "I didn't choose to like him."

"So you do like him?"

"It just happened." She continued, ignoring Max's question. "He was the first person to talk to me. He's cute and funny, so why not?"

Lizzie shrugged, "He's just kind of dorky."

"Yeah but in a totally adorable kind of way."

She glanced at Max, then back at Jane. "To each his own I guess." She said, though by the smile on her face Jane could tell she didn't mean it in a mean way.

xXx

"Bye Jane."

"Bye guys."

She opened the backdoor of Max's car and stepped out, waving goodbye as the two drove away. Jane walked up to her front door, holding her set of keys in her hand. Instead of opening the door she stood on her porch for a few seconds, listening for any sign of movement inside. When she heard nothing for a whole ten seconds she opened the door, closing it behind her and locking it. Once she was inside she looked through every room and opened every closet. Finding the house totally empty she checked that all the doors and windows were still locked then went upstairs in her room.

Jane sat down at her desk, the farthest spot to sit from her bedroom door. She pulled out her homework, hoping to get some done before her mom came home. As she worked she kept one eye on the street from out her window. Though she usually liked some time to herself she found herself counting down to when her mom got home so she would no longer have to be alone in the new house.

ooo look at me slowly introducing the conflict ;) let me know what you guys think it's going to be, I'm curious to hear your guesses

10. Chapter 10: Mike

Even though you guys are probably so tired of hearing me say it *thank you thank you thank you* to everyone for their continued support, especially those who comment on more than one chapter. You the real MVP. I love each and every one of you that has clicked on this story and especially the ones who have continued to read all the way to *chapter 10*. I seriously never thought this story would get this far lol

Monday morning Mike walked into homeroom at the same early time he always did (except for the day when his alarm clock died). Typically there were only a handful of students already there when he arrived. But as he stepped inside the classroom he was admittedly surprised to find Jane sitting in the same desk as always, her chin on her hand. None of his other friends were there yet, as usual. He couldn't help but wonder why she was in so early all of a sudden as he walked over to his desk.

The closer he got to her the more he could see something was off about Jane. Her shoulders were sagging and her eyes had started to form dark circles. She was staring down at a notebook in front of her. On the page were a few doodles he couldn't quite make out. As he passed her he noticed that her eyes were closed. Was she sleeping?

Mike took his seat behind her, the chair scraping on the floor slightly. In front of him Jane sat up suddenly and her head turning slightly in his direction. She rubbed her eyes a few times and faced forward once again. Something was definitely off. Mike set his backpack down on the floor next to him and stared at the back of her head while he tried to decide if he should say something to her. With none of his friends around it was the perfect opportunity. If he didn't take it he would have to wait until English class to ask, and she might have woken up at that point.

He leaned forward in his seat, leaning on the top of his desk. "Hey." He said loud enough for her to hear but not anyone else in the room.

Jane turned around in her chair to face him, a small smile appearing

on her face. But it was different from usual. Normally the smallest hint of a smile would light up a room. Now it seemed half hearted and weak. "Hey." She replied just as meekly

"Are you okay?" He asked, deciding not to beat around the bush. "You seem a little... off."

She shrugged her shoulders, "I'm just tired." Jane said, putting her arm across the back of her chair. Somehow she still looked pretty with dark circles and a flushed complexion. "I haven't been sleeping much."

"Why?"

She smiled at him again, a bit wider than she had before. "It's nothing, really." She said casually. Yet somehow he wasn't convinced. She'd developed dark circles in three days, it must have been bad. Certainly not nothing. "I can guarantee it's not interesting."

Not likely, Mike thought to himself. Nothing about Jane was uninteresting. So he doubted her sudden insomnia would be the only boring thing about her so far. "Why don't you try me?"

Jane stared at him for a few passing seconds. She finally sighed, her eyes dropping down to the floor. "I, um..." Her voice faltered and her brows creased. "I'm on a new medication."

It was such an obvious lie he thought about calling her out right away. "Medication?"

"For blood pressure." She said slowly, as if the lie felt weird in her mouth. "One of the side affects is insomnia."

He nodded a few times. Mike decided not to say anything. Clearly she didn't want to talk about it so he decided it would be best not to pressure her. He only hoped that at some point she would decide to tell him the truth. "You should change the medication then." He said, "You need to get sleep."

Before either of them could say anything more Dustin walked through the door, already rambling about something or other to Mike before he reached his seat. But he couldn't hear a word his friend was

saying over his disappointment that he wouldn't get to talk to Jane privately for another three hours. He looked back at her, watching her flash one last smile at him before turning forward in her seat again.

xXx

"Hey, watch where you're going loser."

The familiar voice of Troy Harrington reached his ears all the way down the hall. The same voice that had tormented him since sixth grade. It didn't come as much of a surprise that he had decided to spend his time after school picking on someone. Mike packed all of the books he needed into his backpack and shut his locker. Out of curiosity he glanced down the hall in the direction Troy's voice to see who had fallen victim to him this time.

"You better learn your place around here quick." He said before knocking their books to the ground.

The person standing in the way of Mike's view moved to the side just enough for him to see Jane, staring down at the floor where her books now lay. A few people around them laughed which only caused a smug grin to spread on Troy's face. Jane, on the other hand, looked like she wanted to disappear. A feeling that was all too familiar to him. Before he could give it a second thought he slung his backpack on his shoulders and started down the hallway. Mike pushed his way through the small crowd that had gathered around the two. Why did kids take such interest in a bully making a scene?

Troy noticed him approaching before Jane did, the grin on his face only growing. "Well, look who it is. Frogface Wheeler."

Jane's head perked up at his last name, her wide eyes landing on him. He finally squeezed his way through the crowd into the small circle where she and Troy stood. "Leave her alone."

"Mike, stop." Jane begged quietly. But he ignored her. Had it been anyone but her he would have stayed out of it and minded his own business. She was an even easier target than he was, new and shy. And no one around them showed any sign of wanting to help her.

"Woah, what's this?" He asked, his tone heavy with sarcasm, "Come to rescue you're little girlfriend?"

His face started to burn, which was only made worse by the laughs that followed his comment. But it was nothing compared to the anger that had started to boil in his stomach. "I said leave her alone. Picking on a girl is a new low, even for you."

Jane put a hand on his arm. Had the circumstances been any different he would have been on top of the world that she was touching him. But he was more worried about the look on her face when he turned towards her. "Mike, please." She said, her voice pleading him. "It's fine, just go."

"Listen to your girlfriend, Wheeler." Troy said, pushing his shoulder with his hand. "She's a big girl, she can handle me all by herself." His gaze moved from Mike to look down at Jane, who was a decent bit shorter than him. "Isn't that right Janey?"

Mike couldn't take it any longer. The hot lump had settled in his stomach was starting to burn, like a clump of lava. He'd taken years of bullying, and watching the same happen to his friends, and never stood up. But seeing Jane be treated in the same way was his last straw. He pushed Troy, hard, in his chest and sent him falling back into the students standing behind him. A look of shock passed over everyone's faces.

Standing up straight again, Troy's expression changed from shock to fury. "You're so dead, Wheeler."

"Jane!" The crowd parted as Max Mayfield pushed her way through, followed by Lizzie Grayson. They looked between the three, then down at Jane's books on the ground. Max bent down to grab her books while Lizzie turned towards Troy. "Leave them alone, Harrington." She said, "Both of them."

"Oh so now Wheeler's got *two* girlfriends?" He asked

Lizzie grabbed the book out of Mike's hand, the only one that hadn't fit in his backpack, and hit Troy's arm with it harder with a loud *thwack*. "Get out of here or next time it'll be your head."

Though he scoffed in response Troy turned away, pushing through the crows and mumbling to himself. Just before he disappeared behind the other students Mike saw him reach up to cradle his arm. Once he was gone Lizzie handed the textbook back to Mike. "Thanks." He said, taking it from her.

"No problem." She said before they both bent down to help collect Jane's books.

The crowd had dispersed by the time they were all gathered and given back to Jane. Her face was redder than he had ever seen. Mike could only imagine how embarrassed she was. "You guys really didn't have to do that."

"Hey, that's what friends are for." Max told her. "Besides we would have missed a once in a life time opportunity. Wheeler standing up to someone."

Mike rolled his eyes, "Shut up."

Lizzie pushed her friend gently. "She's kidding." She said. "It was cool. And if anyone should stand up to Troy it should be you."

Jane looked between the two, her eyebrows coming together. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing." He said quickly before Lizzie could explain. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Mike turned and walked away before she could ask any more questions. He knew it was only a matter of time before she found out how much of a loser he was. It was school wide knowledge. He just didn't want to be there when she did find out.

He reached his car, quickly jumping inside and closing the door. Mike rested his forehead on the steering wheel. The incident that had just taken place played over and over in his mind. It was completely unfair that Jane was now a victim of Troy's bullying. Just like his friends she in no way deserved what she had gotten. She was shy and kind, which were two of the things he liked about her the most. But they also made her an easy target. It had taken Mike five years to

stand up to Troy, he hoped that she would be able to do the same a hell of a lot quicker. He started his car and pulled out of the school, eager to get away knowing what Max and Lizzie were likely telling her inside.

11. Chapter 11: Jane

ya'll aren't even *ready* for this chapter. that's all I'm gonna say ;)

"Jane?"

She looked up from the books she was taking out of her locker, finding one of the kids Mike sat with in homeroom standing next to her. He was just a few inches taller than her, not quite as much as Mike was, with short brown hair. His name had escaped her, but she was sure she'd heard it before (especially since she spent all of homeroom listening to Mike's conversations with his friends). Bill, Phil, Will, something like that. She had absolutely no clue why he had come up to her in the first place, not to mention by himself.

"Yeah?" She asked, taking the last two books she needed out and stuffing them into her bag.

He leaned on the locker a few dows from hers. "I just, I heard what happened with Troy yesterday." Jane's cheeks flushed at the mention of *the incident*. All she wanted to do was forget about the whole thing. The last thing she needed was for people to come up to her and ask her about it. Did the whole school know what happened? "Troy is a jerk. Always has been. We've all been there. I'm sorry that you had to go through that."

Jane shrugged, trying to make the whole thing seem like it wasn't a big deal. "It's okay." She said, "It could have been a lot worse, but Mike stood up for me."

"I bet he did."

Her eyebrows came together. "What?" She asked, thoroughly confused. What kind of comment was that?

He paused, his eyes glancing away for a few moments. "He just- it's nothing, never mind."

"He just what?" She asked, shutting her locker and turning to face

him. "It doesn't sound like nothing."

Bill-Phill-Will let out a sigh. Her eyes scanned his face, desperately trying to figure out what it was he wasn't saying. She wanted to cater as much information on Mike as she possible could. Who better to be a source than one of his best friends? "Look I'm really not supposed to tell you okay?" He said, "He'll kill me if I do."

"You already started telling me." She pointed out. "It would be really easy to just finish what you were saying." What could Mike possibly have said that he explicitly asked his friend not to tell her?

He glanced around the hallway, looking down both ends twice. "Okay, fine, but you can't say anything."

"Okay, I wont." She said eagerly. "Promise."

He took just one step closer to her, resting his head against the locker. "I can't believe I'm going to tell you this." Jane raised her eyebrows at him expectantly. There was no way in hell she was going to let this go, and he seemed to know it. "He likes you. A lot. That's why he stood up to Troy, because it was *you* that he was messing with."

What he said didn't properly process in her mind, as if he was speaking some sort of English dialect. She knew the words he was saying yet she didn't understand them put together in the slightest bit. Jane blinked a few times, her mouth open but no sound coming out. She shook her head, breaking herself from her silence. "Wait, what?"

"He's been totally crushing on you since your first day." He told her. "He told me he thinks you're cute and nice and funny."

"*He did?*"

"Yeah, he did."

Jane's head was spinning. Mike thinks she's cute? And funny and nice? And he'd said so *out loud*? Was she dreaming? She never thought she'd hear something so amazing, especially on a Tuesday morning. It was so incredible and unbelievable that she wondered if

he was even telling the truth. But as soon as the thought entered her mind she pushed it right back out. What reason did he have to make something up like that? After school the day before Max told her how Mike and all his friends had been picked on by Troy as long as she'd been at Hawkins. Lizzie, who lived in town her whole life, said that they'd been targeted since the beginning of middle school. She also said that others had made fun of them in elementary school. Would he really make up something like that?

He picked his head up, raising an eyebrow at her. "How do you feel about him?"

"I, um..." Jane's voice trailed off. She wasn't too eager to tell one of Mike's friends exactly how she felt about him. What if he went right into lunch and told him everything she said? It would be completely embarrassing! Especially if he had been making it up. What if he suspected how she felt and made up a story about Mike's feelings to get her to tell him? "He's a really good friend." She said finally, "He's always been really nice to me. And he was one of the first people to talk to me here."

He shifted his weight from one leg to the other. "Okay," he said, "but how do you *feel* about him? Do you like him back?"

"I-" before she could say any more the bell for fifth period rang. Jane had never been more relieved to hear the bell before in her life. "I have to go. See you tomorrow."

She turned away from him and bolted down the hall before he could ask her one last time. As she headed towards the cafeteria, weaving through a sea of students, her head was spinning a million miles a minute. Was it really possible? Could he really like her back? She remembered how he smiled to himself when he left her house and how he stood up to Troy for her. Both Max and Lizzie had said he and his friends had never stood up to him before then.

Jane finally made it to the cafeteria, making a B line for the table she sat at with Max. She spotted her friend already sitting down and went even faster. As soon she dropped into her chair the words came pouring out of her mouth. She told her everything Will (whose name Max confirmed for her) had said to her and everything that had been

running through her head. More than once she had to stop her friend from turning in her chair to look at the table Mike sat at across the room.

"What do I do?" She asked, desperate for advice from a female friend

"Talk to him!" Max said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. Which, in reality, it probably was. "Tell him you like him! As him out! *Something!*"

Jane groaned, propping her chin on her hand. "But what if he made it up?"

She shook her head and leaned back in her chair. "No way. Byers isn't like that." She said, "If it was Sinclair, maybe. But not Byers. We've had a few classes together over the years, he's a really nice kid."

"But *what if?*"

Max rolled her eyes, "For god sakes Jane he's not lying!" She said, pointing a finger at her. "After school you're going to walk right up to Wheeler and tell him you like him. Got it?"

"Got it."

When school ended Jane ran to her mothers car, passing right by Mike at his locker and not daring to look at him twice.

At home she went straight into the kitchen and grabbed the Yellow Pages, then up to her room. Jane sat down on her bed and flipped to the 'W' page. Her finger trailed down through the names until she got to 'Wheeler'. There were three Wheelers in the book, but only one with a Hawkins area code. Ted Wheeler, who she assumed was his dad. She folded down the corner of the page before shutting the book and set it down.

Jane paced her room for nearly twenty minutes, debating whether she should or shouldn't dial his number. As she walked the length of her room she could hear Max's voice in her head telling her to stop procrastinating and just get it over with. She sat back down on her bed when her feet started to hurt. Taking a deep breath she grabbed her phone and opened the Yellow Pages back up. Now or never. She

dialed his number with a shaking finger, holding her breath while the line started ringing.

"Hello?" A woman's voice said once the ringing stopped.

Jane swallowed the nervous lump in her throat. "Yes, hi, is Mike there?"

"Yes he is, who is this?"

God was she talking to his mom? The thought of having to go through his mom in order to confess her feelings to him was absolutely mortifying. "I'm a friend of his from school, Jane. I had a, uh, homework question."

"Okay, hold on one second." By the rustling sound she guessed the phone had been set down. A few moments passed and she could faintly hear the same voice yelling "Michael, phone!" Jane couldn't hold back a small smile at the sound of his full name. The same rustling sound came through the receiver followed by a now familiar voice.

"Hello?"

Despite the army of butterflies stampeding one another in her stomach her smile grew at the sound of his voice. "Mike?"

"Yeah, who's this?"

Her face was starting to feel hotter and hotter by the second. She only hoped she didn't sound a fraction of how nervous she was. She had hoped to sound calm and collected. Though she wasn't sure how well she was pulling that off. "It's Jane."

"Really?" He asked, then cleared his throat. "I mean hi. Hi, um, what's up?"

Jane pulled the phone into her lap and leaned against her headboard. "I just... I have to tell you something."

"Okay, sure. What is it?"

She hesitated, trying to think of how to start what she had to say. "I talked to your friend Will today." She finally started, "About what happened with Troy yesterday."

"...okay."

"And he told me that, um..." God why was this so hard? Jane leaned her head back against the cold wood, shutting her eyes. Behind her lids she pictured Mike standing in the kitchen, or wherever the phone in his house was (she just happened to pick the kitchen), smiling to himself because she had called him. "He told me that the reason you stood up for me, and why you're always so nice to me, is because you like me."

Mike was silent. She counted two, five, ten seconds. In her mind Jane was screaming for him to say something, *anything*, to break the awful silence. She wondered if he could hear her pounding heartbeat over the phone. The first sound to break the quiet was him letting out a breath. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah."

"God, I told him not to tell you." She could hear him sigh again. "Jesus, I can't believe he told you. It probably messed up everything."

"Mike-

"Do you hate me?"

Jane actually laughed. The thought that she could possibly hate him was completely ridiculous. If he hadn't sounded so worried she would have thought he was kidding. "God, Mike, no. I don't hate you."

"Okay."

She sunk down farther onto her bed, a smile still on her face. "Are you busy right now?" Jane asked, "I want to talk about this in person."

"No, I was just doing homework. I'll come over now?"

"Okay."

"Okay."

Jane grinned even wider, if that was even possible. "I'll see you soon."

"Bye."

She hung up the phone and jumped off her bed. Standing in front of the mirror she inspected each and every inch of her outfit. Was it appropriate attire for confessing her feelings to the cute guy she sat next to in English? Jeans and a t-shirt, both with the cuffs rolled up, seemed fine. Just *fine*. Like her. But apparently Mike liked fine so she didn't bother changing. She grabbed her purse then went downstairs.

Jane sat down on the steps of her porch while she waited for him to show up. She didn't think she could be around her mom and pretend everything was totally normal. Until they talked about it fully she wanted to keep the whole situation to herself. Her leg bounced up and down as she stared at the spot he had parked in both times that he came to her house. She had no idea how long she had waited for him when his car pulled into view, but it didn't feel very long. Jane got to her feet and jumped down the rest of the steps when his car pulled into view. She made no attempt to hide her wide smile as she walked over to his car and opened the door.

12. Chapter 12: Mike

I'm sorry, 15 reviews on the last chapter alone? I am absolutely *speechless*! And I'm so so so happy you guys liked it :) though who doesn't like mileven

"Hey."

"Hey."

Jane climbed into the passenger seat of his car for the third time in a week. He was starting to get used to the sight of her sitting next to him. If he thought he'd been nervous the first two times this was ten times worse. He was still reeling from the phone call they had just had, not quite able to believe that Will had told her what should have been a secret. Mike couldn't meet her eyes he was so mortified. A part of him was expecting her to get mad at him and never talk to him again. But as she pulled the seatbelt across her chest she had a wide and infectious smile on her face.

"Is there someplace we could go? To talk?"

His stomach did a nervous backflip. *Talk* could have meant anything. Though the smile she wore should have been a giveaway that she wasn't upset with him he couldn't shake the feeling that he had completely messed up. "Yeah, um, there's a park near the water."

She nodded, leaning forward and putting on the radio. "That sounds good."

Mike started the car and pulled away from her house. His heart was pounding so loudly he was thankful she'd turned on the music. There was no doubt in his mind she could have heard it if she didn't. The suspense of having to wait even longer to hear what she had to say was turning him into a nervous wreck. As he drove he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye a few times. She seemed way too casual and relaxed for the situation they were in. Especially compared to how he was feeling. He wondered if she could tell just how anxious he was.

By the time they reached the park the sun had started to set. They walked around, trying to find a spot to sit, in silence. The more time passed the more on edge he felt. He kept his fingers crossed that he wouldn't throw up in the middle of their conversation. Jane started heading towards the benches that looked over the water, Mike following her. The two sat down next to each other, still silent. He waited and waited for her to say something but she only stared out at the water.

"I'm sorry." He said, unable to take the quiet anymore

She looked away from the view, her eyes landing on him. Her eyebrows had pulled together on her forehead. "Why are you sorry?"

"I don't know." He shrugged, still not able to directly look at her. "I just am."

Jane pulled her legs onto the bench. She leaned her chin on her hand, her elbow propped up on her knee. "Is what Will told me true?" She asked. He stared down at the ground in front of him, his leg bouncing up and down. Though he wasn't looking at her he could feel her eyes watching him. He felt impossibly small under her gaze, as if she was looking at him through a microscope. "Mike?"

"I can't believe he told you." His voice came out quieter than before, as if she wouldn't be able to hear him. "It probably completely messed everything up."

"It didn't."

He was too wrapped up in his own thoughts to hear her. His mind was traveling at the speed of light. "And I totally don't blame you if you never want to talk to me again."

"Mike-

"I mean I guess you were going to find out eventually." He continued, "But I just didn't want it to be so soon. At least a month I guess-

"Mike stop!" Jane reached forward and grabbed his hand, which definitely got his attention. He forced himself to look away from the ground and up at her face. She was still sporting a small smile, one

that looked incredibly cute on her. Why did she always have to look so damn cute? "I'm not mad or upset or anything like that."

His eyebrows perked up as he tried to read her face for any sign that she was lying. He didn't find any. "Really?"

"Really." She turned on the bench so she was facing him, her fingers still linked with his. He admitted to himself that their hands looked good together. Of course this observation didn't dare leave his lips. "I mean, I kind of wish that you would have told me, but it's fine."

"Yeah, well, I'm not really good at this stuff." He admitted, which was probably the understatement of the year.

Girls were like a foreign species to him, one that spoke an entirely different language. Why girls were so different was likely the biggest mystery of them all. Even Jane, who wasn't quite like any girl he'd ever met before, was a difficult being to understand. Especially since Will had put the idea in his head that she had some sort of secret plan when she invited him inside to do homework. If that was true then what other plans did she have? His mom once told him that girls were always ten steps ahead on the male species and he would likely never know what hit him. She clearly knew exactly what she was talking about.

Jane leaned against the back of the bench. Mike tried not to be hyperaware of the fact that she hadn't yet let go of his hand, and was miserably unsuccessful. "Me neither." She said. "They should make some kind of manual."

"I think they have."

She looked back up at him, her smile twitching upwards even more. "One that actually helps."

He couldn't help but crack a bit of a smile himself. Her relaxed demeanor was, surprisingly, having a bit of an affect on his own. Little by little he was beginning to feel less nervous. Especially since she genuinely didn't seem upset at all. That definitely helped. "Look, I promise I'm not going to be weird or anything. We can pretend none of this ever happened and just keep being friends."

Her eyebrows came together once again. "And what makes you think I want to pretend this never happened?" She asked, as if she had no clue how he came up with such a ridiculous idea.

"You don't?"

"No, that's not what I want to do *at all*." Jane pulled her legs close to her chest, resting her chin on one of her knees. How was it possible for her to get more and more cut by the minute? It was completely unfair. "That's probably the last thing I want to do."

Mike raised an eyebrow at her. "Okay." He said, "So then what do you want to do?" She was making less sense the more they talked. Maybe he was even more clueless about girls than he had originally thought. If that was the case then he was absolutely hopeless and should just give up then and there.

"God, I'm so bad at this." She said, rubbing the side of her head with the hand that wasn't holding onto his. Her gaze dropped slightly. For the first time since she got in his car she was showing the smallest sign of being nervous. "I like being your friend, but I don't want things to go back to the way they've been."

He stared at her, feeling desperately lost. "I don't understand."

Jane sighed, leaning her head back for a moment. When she brought it back down her cheeks were red. "I like you, okay?" Her eyes moved back up to meet his again, only this time she didn't look as confident as she had a few minutes ago. "I don't really know anything about you, and you don't really know anything about me, but I like you. Probably a lot more than I should."

Mike blinked a few times, her words not fully processing. In the short time that they knew each other he had convinced himself that there was no way in hell she could possibly have the sort of feelings that he had for her. Even as she was telling him the exact opposite he found himself not quite able to believe it. How could someone like Jane ever have any sort of feelings for someone like him? It seemed to go against the laws of the universe. Any response he could have given her was stuck in his throat, unable to fully come out.

Since he didn't say anything she seemed to decide to keep talking. "I'm probably making an idiot out of myself aren't I? Maybe this was, um, a bad idea. I just-"

"Wait, wait, hold on a second." He said, turning towards her. Jane's cheeks were starting to turn more pink and it wasn't from the sun that had turned the sky a deep shade of orange. "Are you serious?"

She laughed in a way that lacked any sort of humor. "What? You think I'm joking?"

"No, no, it's not that." He said quickly. "It's just that I never really thought that you could like someone like me." He felt his own face getting hot from saying it out loud. It felt especially stupid since she had, just moments before, told him that she did.

By the look on her face she seemed to think it sounded silly too. "What? Because people like Troy make you think that you're less than you are?" He tried not to cringe at the confirmation that Max and Lizzie had told her everything about his experience with bullies. "Mike we're not that different. I got made fun of at my old school all the time."

"Really?"

"Really." She said. "When I was in eighth grade I cut my hair too short by accident and everyone kept saying I looked like a boy. They called me 'James' for two years."

The thought that she had been through a similar experience in school as he had made his heart ache. No one deserved to be picked on for so long, *especially* not Jane. "That really sucks."

"Yeah well that's just part of it." He felt her gently squeeze his hand. "I really like you, okay? And maybe we could, you know, do something some time. Like dinner. But different from the last time."

"That would be awesome."

Her smile grew double in size and was quickly mirrored on his own face.

The two sat on the bench until the sun disappeared and the sky turned black, talking about nothing and everything all at the same time. They talked about their friends, including the ones she had upstate and the ones she'd made in Hawkins. She told him a bit more about her experience with bullying back at her old school, but didn't go into it too much. Mike had a feeling she could see how much he hated hearing that she'd gone through what he had and decided to avoid much detail, which he was thankful for.

When it got too dark for them to see each other clearly they stood up and walked back to his car. While he debated if he should hold her hand or not, likely putting way too much thought into it, Jane beat him to it. His palm buzzed with electricity at the feeling of her skin on his own. Once they were in the car she turned the radio back on. Instead of gazing out the window as she had on the ride there her focus was on him for the entire fifteen minute drive. It was a pleasant change to not feel so antsy while she watched him.

Mike walked her up to her door but she didn't immediately go inside. Instead she turned to face him, still smiling as wide as she had been when they left the park. "So, I'll see you tomorrow then?"

"Yeah, yeah of course." He said reflecting the smile she had on. His cheeks were beginning to hurt, but he didn't think he would be able to stop any time soon.

"Okay, well, goodnight."

"Night."

Jane pulled her keys out of her bag. Rather than turn towards the door and unlock it she took two steps towards him and stood on her toes. Before he could realize what she was doing and pressed a quick kiss on his cheek. She flashed him one last smile before opening the door and closing it behind her, leaving him almost breathless.

The spot where she had kissed him burned as he started towards his car. Butterflies exploded in his stomach as he replayed everything that had happened that night. There was still a lot they hadn't talked about but he didn't care. Jane liked him, there wasn't much else he needed to know. Could his day possibly get any better?

"Mike?"

He turned back towards her house, finding her standing in the doorway. Jane walked the short length of the porch, then jumped down the three steps so she was on the walkway. Once she stood in front of him again she put her hands on his cheeks and kissed him again, only this time on the lips. He was just as unprepared as he was when she kissed his cheek. Only this time he forced himself out of his dazed confusion quicker. Mike wrapped his arms around her waist, leaning down so she would no longer have to stand on her toes. He could feel her smiling, which was probably the best feeling in the world.

Just as quickly as she had kissed him she pulled away. Though he didn't blame her. She'd left the front door wide open and her moms car was parked in the driveway. She looked up at him, her cheeks as red as his felt. Jane bit her bottom lip, smiling still. "Goodnight." She said again, taking two steps back before turning around and hurrying up the steps.

As he drove home all he could think about was Jane. Jane smiling at him for the first time. Jane asking him to come inside and do homework. Jane kissing him. Jane, Jane, Jane. He didn't think he would ever be able to think of anything other than Jane. The idea was something he didn't mind at all.

13. Chapter 13: Jane

ahhh I'm still in awe at how well this story is doing, and I owe it all to you. I love love love each and every one of you who have read this and you're probably so tired of hearing me say that.

"*You what?!*"

Jane stood at her locker, Lizzie and Max starring at her wide eyed as she told them the story of everything that had happened with Mike the night before. Her cheeks grew warmer and warmer the more of the story she told. By the time she got to the part where she kissed him she thought her head might combust it was so red hot. Her two friends starred at her with their mouths hanging open. She no longer minded all the questions they asked her. Her friends upstate would have asked just as many. It was a relief that she had found some girl friends that she could tell this sort of thing too.

She tried to shrug off their shock, but she was admittedly a bit surprised with herself too. After she closed the door the first time she stood at the bottom of the stairs but found herself unable to go up. In her head she saw Mike walking to his car and driving away. She hadn't quite ready for the night to be over. Before she knew what she was doing she flung the door back open and her feet carried her right back over to him. She'd never kissed a boy before and never really minded the fact much. But all of a sudden she couldn't stop thinking about kissing him. So she did. It was better than she had ever expected.

"Guys it's not that big of a deal." Jane told them, even though it *absolutely* was a big deal. She kissed Mike Wheeler, and he kissed her back. The day should be marked as a historical event. She should write to the government and ask them to give schools the day off to observe The Day Jane Kissed Mike.

Max shook her head, "What do you mean 'it's not a big deal'?" She asked, still obviously stunned from the news. "It's totally a big deal? Have you ever kissed anyone before him?"

Jane opened her mouth, ready to defend herself, before closing it after realizing that Max had a point. Her first kiss was, needless to say, a big deal. Her two friends looked at each other, their open mouths shifting into wide grins. "Oh my god, he was totally your first kiss."

"Shut up." Jane said, turning back to her locker and taking out the rest of the books she didn't need for the first two classes she had. Even as she turned away she could still see them gawking at her out of the corner of her eye. "Okay, maybe it's kind of a big deal. But it's not earth-shattering news, can you guys calm down?"

Lizzie moved to lean against the locker next to Jane, hugging her books close to her chest. "We can't help it, okay?" She said, "We're just excited for you."

"And it is kind of earth-shattering news." Max chimed in. "Both you and Wheeler are ultra nerds and super in love with each other, but too damn chicken to do anything about it."

Jane punched her arm lightly. "I'm not a nerd." She said, half heartedly defending herself

"Okay Miss I-got-an-A-on-my-first-math-test-in-school." Max answered in her trademark sarcasm. Lizzie snorted but didn't say anything else after Jane glared at both of them.

She shut her locker, then turned around and leaned her back on it. "Yeah, well, my English grades aren't as stellar."

"That's because you're too busy paying attention to *Mike*." Lizzie said, making her voice sound all dreamy. Max laughed, clearly agreeing with her impression, and Jane found herself smiling too. After all she was probably right. She felt like a love sick mess whenever she was around him. Some of it was bound to show. "Speak of the devil."

All three pairs of eyes glanced down the hallway, following Mike as he passed by them. He was too busy trying to weave through the traffic to notice them watching him, which they were all silently thankful for. About twenty feet away from where they stood he opened up the door to homeroom and disappeared behind it. Jane

was suddenly eager to follow him inside.

"We better let Mrs. Wheeler get to class before she gets separation anxiety." Max said before bumping Jane's shoulder with her own. "See you at lunch."

Jane rolled her eyes but knew better than to argue and instead waved goodbye to her two friends. She then pushed off of her locker and headed towards homeroom. The closer she got to the classroom door the more butterflies started to pop up in her stomach, even more than usual. She wasn't just going to see Mike. She was going to see him with the knowledge that he felt the same way she did. Everything was in a totally different ballpark. Though she liked the way that things were before she couldn't wait to see how things between them would change. Jane wasn't a big fan of change at all, but this was one she was planning on welcoming with open arms. She suddenly wished she had gotten more boy advice from her friends to prepare her for a situation like this.

She opened the door to the classroom and stepped in, her eyes instinctively glancing over in Mike's direction. Only when she did she was greeted with four other pairs looking right back at her. He and all of his friends seemed to have stopped mid conversation to stare at her when she came in. As she walked to her chair she was suddenly self conscious of the way her hair looked or the clothes she was wearing now that they were all paying attention to her so closely.

Jane went straight for her chair, pretending as if she hadn't noticed them looking at her at all. Just before she sat down she allowed herself one last glance at Mike. Since he was still looking at her their eyes met and she flashed him a quick smile before sitting down. Her cheeks started to feel warm as she heard the boys talking in hushed voices behind her. Though they were sitting so close she had a hard time hearing them since they were all talking over one another. The only thing she could hear clearly was Mike hissing "can you guys just shut up already?!" She cracked yet another smile.

Silence fell over the group while Jane anxiously awaited their change in topic. She had spent the past two weeks listening to them talk instead of trying to start conversations of her own. At the time she had thought it would be the only way to learn about the cute guy

who sat behind her. And although they started to talk more, and she was beginning to get to know him all on her own, she still listened in. It gave her something to do.

"So, Mike," she heard one of them say louder than they had been speaking before. Jane was mostly sure his name was Dustin, but not entirely. "Didn't you say you were going to *Benny's after school*."

Jane's eyebrows pulled together at the unusual amount of emphasis he put on the last few words. Mike must have been confused as well because just moments later she heard his voice next. "What?"

"Oh yeah." The other one, Lucas, chimed in. "You said you were going to go get dinner *by yourself* but you wanted some *company*."

"I never said that."

Jane had to cover her mouth to keep herself from laughing out loud. What they were doing was so painfully obvious, yet Mike seemed to still be oblivious. "*Yes you did*." Dustin replied

"*No I didn't*." Mike told him. "My moms keeping us all on lockdown so we can have a family night since Nancy's home from school. I told you that yesterday."

"I thought that was tomorrow." Lucas said. "And you were going to Benny's tonight."

Jane vaguely heard Will mutter under his breath, "Jesus Christ, guys."

She bit down on her bottom lip to surprise the fit of giggles she was holding back. Behind her they continued to go back and forth, Mike still having no clue what was going on and his two friends still trying to drop hints. The longer they went on the harder it was for her to stay silent. Finally she couldn't take it anymore and turned around in her seat to face them. "You guys are not subtle at all." She said, her eyes going back and forth between Dustin and Lucas. "It's really kind of tragic."

The look of confusion already on Mike's face only worsened. He looked from her to his two friends. "What the hell is going on?"

They glanced at her, waiting for her to provide some sort of explanation but she stayed quiet. She couldn't help but grin at the obvious discomfort they started to show as they realized they would have to tell him themselves. "We're trying to get you to ask her out!" Lucas said finally. His minor outburst only made her smile wider.

The only response Mike gave was an "Oh my god." Before he put his face in his hands. Next to him Will seemed to be just as amused by the situation as she was. "Are you kidding me?"

"Would you have without our help?" Dustin asked him. Jane couldn't help but wonder who had taught him the definition of the word 'help'. Mike seemed to agree that he was, in fact, not helping.

"You could have waited and found out." He said, only peeking out from behind his hands for a few moments. "Guys, seriously?"

The look on Mike's face and the way his cheeks started to get more and more red was absolutely adorable. She found herself with the same feeling she had after she closed her front door the first time, moments before she ran back outside and kissed him. Though Jane had a feeling that wouldn't go over as well in the mostly full classroom with the teacher sitting at the front. "Mike, it's fine." She told him. "Maybe we could do something tomorrow? Since you're busy tonight."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw his friends all look at each other, then at him, and then at her. But all of her focus was on Mike, and how the corners of his lips turned up before spreading into a full smile. "Yeah, okay." He said, his hands dropping down on the top of his desk. Jane was glad she now had a full view of his face again. "That sounds good."

"Okay." She said. Jane didn't think she would ever get sick of seeing him smile. It was completely infectious, one that was dangerous. At least it felt dangerous. Fever, nausea, irregular breathing patterns. If she didn't know better she would go see a doctor. She looked at Dustin and Lucas, who sat behind him, and said with heavy sarcasm "Thanks for the help." Before turning back around and facing the front of the room again. With her backpack to them she could hear both Mike and Will snickering at her comment

xXx

Jane got out of Max's car after getting a ride home, waving goodbye to her friend before she sped off down the street. As she turned to face her house her eyes fell on an unfamiliar car in the driveway. Her eyebrows came together, but she wasn't too worried. She assumed her mom had invited a friend from work over, or something else that wasn't such a big deal. Jane walked up to her house, her mind still too stuck on Mike to think about much of anything else. When she got to her front door she turned the knob, finding it already unlocked. She closed the door behind her.

"Mama, I'm home!" Jane called, heading towards the kitchen to look for her mother. Now that things between her and Mike were moving along she figured it was about time she let her mom in on what was going on. She was going to find out eventually, and Jane had a feeling she had started to catch on. Her mom was smart like that, reading her as easily as if she could read her mind.

When she reached the kitchen she stopped dead in her tracks. Sitting at the table was a familiar face, but not the one she had been expecting to see. Her stomach churned as cold brown eyes looked up from the table they sat at and met her own. It took everything in her to not turn around and run right back out the front door and chase after Max's car.

"Hi Janey."

14. Chapter 14: Mike

Sorry I didn't upload yesterday everyone, the server was down and came bak up after I fell asleep but I'm back with another chapter. I originally wrote Jane's father as a regular guy but after reading comments I decided to change him to someone else ;) sorry if there is any typos in the description of her father I forgot to change! (also I feel like this chapter sucks yikes but I'm still gonna upload it)

Mike drove home from school, uncertainty bubbling up in his stomach. At some point in the day he was supposed to go to Benny's with Jane, likely to have a more in depth discussion about how things between them were going to continue. He figured they would come up with a time to meet up during school but she hadn't shown up. When she didn't come to homeroom he figured she was probably just running late. But when the seat next to him in English remained empty for the entire forty five minute period he started to wonder if she was going to come to school at all. At lunch, seeing Max sitting along at the table across the room, he began to worry.

Had she suddenly gotten sick? Was she ditching school to avoid seeing him, suddenly changing her mind about how she felt about him? He wasn't sure why but he could just feel that there was more to the story than her just not being in school. When he got home and took out his homework, trying for all of ten minutes to get some work done. He quickly learned that it was hopeless.

Mike went downstairs and grabbed the Yellow Pages off of the kitchen counter. He first checked the "I" pages, but found five different Ives. Since it was an old edition, from when she loved upstate, he wasn't surprised that none of the numbers had a Hawkins area code. None of the first names were much help since he didn't know either of her parents names. He then flipped to the "H" pages, then dialed the number next to *Neil Hargrove*.

The line rang exactly five times before he heard some rustling, followed by a somewhat familiar voice. "Hello?"

Mike leaned on the wall next to the phone. The only family member

around was his dad sitting in the living room in front of the television, which was the equivalent from being home alone. "Max?"

"Um, yeah." She answered. "Who is this?"

"It's Mike." He could practically see her shocked expression. The two had hardly ever spoken to one another before Jane moved to Hawkins. Even he was a bit surprised at what he was doing.

A beat or two of silence passed before she spoke again. "Wheeler?"

"Yes." He said, trying not to sound annoyed. What other Mike did she know? "Have you heard from Jane today?"

"You worried about your girlfriend?" She asked, her tone heavy with sarcasm

Mike rolled his eyes, glad she wasn't able to see him. "We were supposed to go to Benny's today and she didn't come to school. I just want to make sure everything's okay."

He heard her sigh quietly over the phone. "Alright. I'll give her a call." She told him. "Give me a minute, I'll tell you what she says. Then you get her number yourself."

"Thank you."

Mike hung up the phone then leaned his head against the wall behind him. He didn't dare leave the room, not wanting to miss the call he was now expecting. In the other room he heard the dramatic voiceover for an advertisement on television. Both of his parents were so completely oblivious that even if they heard the conversation he'd just had they wouldn't know what was going on. The only one who had any chance of catching on was Nancy, but she was over at a friend's house.

A little more than two minutes after he hung up the phone started ringing again. Mike quickly picked up the receiver, bringing it back to his ear. "Yeah?"

"Something's wrong." Max told him, sounding much more serious than she had before. "Her dad answered the phone."

"So?"

"Her dad doesn't live with her, dummy." She said. "She totally refuses to talk about him and he just answered the phone and wouldn't let me talk to her."

Mike's stomach rolled over. Jane had never once brought up her father, but Mike was sure that he hadn't mentioned either of his parents to her. He couldn't help but feel like a total idiot for not knowing anything about her father. Especially the fact that he didn't even *live* with her. Plus the way that Max talked about him Mike had a feeling he wasn't exactly the greatest guy which only made him more worried.

"We have to go there. Pick up Lizzie on the way here too."

Mike was more confused than ever. "What?"

"We're her friends too, and now you've got me all worried about her." She told him, starting to sound annoyed. "So are we going over there or not?"

He wasn't sure how to response at first. They were probably being dramatic, and it was likely nothing. Jane was probably just in bed sick, and they were just imagining some sort of situation with her father that was totally outlandish. The best thing would probably be to leave it alone and ask Jane about it when she got back to school. Showing up at her house unexpected could have been the last thing they should be doing.

"I'll be over in 10."

xXx

Almost half an hour later Mike was parked in front of Jane's house with Max sitting next to him and Lizzie in the back seat. They all starred up at her house, the lights downstairs and up in her bedroom lit up. They waited with baited breath as if they expected to see something through the illuminated windows. But nothing happened. The more time passed the more anxious Mike was starting to get, and it didn't help that both Max and Lizzie seemed to be just as nervous.

"Let's just knock." Max said suddenly, unbuckling her seatbelt. "I'm tired of just sitting here."

Mike and Lizzie followed her as she got out of the car and walked up to the front door. His stomach twisted as he realized how different the circumstances had been last time he stood on her porch. The rational part of his brain was desperately trying to convince him that he was overreacting, that the three of them were about to make complete idiots of themselves by being so worried. But his instincts, combined with the nervous looks on the two girls faces, made him think that wasn't true.

Max rang the doorbell, which could be heard echoing through the house. Mike counted ten seconds before the door opened, revealing a man who towered over the three of them. He had silver hair, light eyes, and smiled just as wide as Jane did whenever Mike said something sort of funny. Only on him the smile was... different. Mike couldn't put his finger on it, but it wasn't the same joyful and warm expression Jane often wore.

"Can I help you kids?" He asked, looking between the three of them. The door was open just enough for him to stand in, leaving almost no room for them to look inside.

Lizzie was the first one to snap out of the shock of standing in front of Jane's father to speak. "We're friends of Jane's." She told him, a polite smile replacing the worried expression she had worn only minutes before. "She wasn't in school today so we wanted to stop by and see if she was okay."

"That's really nice of you, but she's not feeling very well." He replied quickly, the words coming out sounding practiced. Or at least they sounded that way to Mike. "I'm not sure if visitors is a good idea right now, but I'll tell her you stopped by."

Mike could feel his stomach sinking down to his feet. First he wouldn't let Max talk to her on the phone, then totally shuts down the idea of them seeing her. The part of him that said he was overreacting was getting more and more quiet. There was definitely something off about this guy.

"Okay, that sounds good." She said, seemingly unbothered by his response. "Tell her we hope she feels better."

His smile grew, yet it still didn't settle right with Mike. In contrast to his grin his eyes showed no sign of kindness, staring them down as if he were evaluating if three teenagers were any sort of threat. "I will. And thanks for stopping by to check on her. I'm glad Jane has made such great friends."

Before they could say anything more he shut the door in their faces. The smile that Lizzie had temporarily put on instantly fell back, her expression now matching the unsettled ones both Mike and Max wore. None of them made any attempt to move, all listening for any kind of noise from inside. Almost a whole minute later he could vaguely hear her father's voice speaking, though Mike couldn't make out any words. Max was the first to move, turning around and going down the three steps. Instead of heading towards Mike's car she turned and started towards the garage, which connected to the side of the house.

Mike and Lizzie quickly followed her. "What are you doing?" He asked, all three of them stopping behind the car parked in the driveway.

"We're going to sneak in her window." Max said as if they discussed it earlier and he was ridiculous for even asking her.

Lizzie seemed just as surprised as he felt. "Max, no, we can't." She said, watching her friend look from the ground to Jane's bedroom window, as if trying to figure out the best way to get up.

"Yes, we *can*." She replied, turning back to face them. Her concerned look had now morphed into one of anger. "I don't trust that guy for a second. And if either of you can honestly say you do I will gladly get back in the car."

Both of them were quiet in response. There was definitely something not right about the man they'd just spoken too. He was charming, yet it didn't seem at all genuine. It was hard to believe someone like him had helped create someone as wonderful as Jane. Mike waited for Lizzie to continue to protest, but the three seemed to be in silent

agreement about their opinions of her father.

"The worst that can happen is we find out she's actually sick and we leave." Max said, turning back to look at Jane's bedroom window.

It took them almost ten minutes to figure out how to get up to the second floor and execute it. First they climbed into the hood of the car, which was parked close enough to the garage to be helpful. After noticing the now dented hood Mike hoped it was her dad's car. Max went first, both Lizzie and Mike giving her a boost. Once she was on the roof of the garage she then pulled up Lizzie while Mike lifted her. With both of them up they then pulled Mike up, which was the most difficult part since there was no one to lift him.

Jane's bedroom window was on top of the garage roof, which was an incredible relief. Once they were close enough to look inside Mike instantly spotted her lying on her bed with her back to them. There were no sign of tissues or medicine or anything else to indicate she was sick, which definitely seemed strange if she was so sick she couldn't even answer the phone which sat next to her bed.

Max tapped on the window, just loud enough for Jane to hear. The last thing they needed was to make too much noise and get caught by her father. She hardly picked her head up, likely dismissing the sound for anything other than three kids sitting outside her window. When she didn't turn around Max tapped again, a little louder than before, finally getting her attention.

Her head turned to face them, her eyes going wide when she spotted them. She bolted upright and hurried over to the window. When she was close enough to unlock the window Mike finally was able to get a good look at her. His eyebrows came together when he noticed a dark mark on her cheek. It looked almost like a bruise.

Jane opened the window, looking somewhere between shocked and angry. "What the hell are you guys doing here?" She whispered

"You weren't in school today." Lizzie said

"So?"

"So first you're not in school, then all of a sudden your dad's here?" Max continued, her voice climbing. Jane quickly shushed her, then glanced nervously at her bedroom door behind her. A look of guilt flashed across Max's face. "What the hell is going on?"

She sighed, tearing her eyes away from her door to look at them. "It's nothing." Jane said shortly, the answering sounding automatic.

"Is that why you look scared to death?" Lizzie challenged. She was right. The look Jane wore was one that he had never seen before, and it wasn't one he liked seeing at all.

Jane flinched slightly at her friend's observation, but completely ignored it otherwise. "You guys *cannot* be here. Please just leave. I'll be in school tomorrow, I promise."

"We're not leaving." Mike said, finally regaining the ability to speak. He hated seeing her looking so distraught and feeling as if he couldn't do anything to help. The idea of leaving her without knowing what was going on, and not knowing what they were leaving her with, was simply not an option. "Not until you tell us what's going on."

Her expression softened slightly but she still looked scared out of her mind. "I *can't*. There's not enough time, and if he finds you guys here he'll kill me." Mike's stomach tightened again at her word choice. "Please, just go."

"Fine." Max said, the same determination in her voice as when she told Mike that they were taking a trip to Jane's house. "But you're coming with us."

She opened her mouth to continue to protest, but closed it shortly after. He could practically see her struggling with what to do. Though he knew it was stretch for her to agree to come with them he was ready to beg her if she said no. The thought of leaving her alone with the man they'd just met made him even more nervous than he was on the drive there. Even if her mom was home he still wasn't crazy about the idea. Max definitely had the right idea. He was not going to leave without her.

Jane finally sighed, straightening up and walking over to her

bedroom door. The click of the lock could be heard all the way from his spot on the roof. He couldn't help but allow himself a small smile as she turned around and back towards them. With their help she climbed out of the window and closed the curtains before they dropped down off of the roof and ran back to Mike's car. Once they were all strapped in he drove away so fast he wondered if he had left skid marks behind.

15. Chapter 15: Jane

this is a bit of a heavy chapter, so despite the mild spoilers I want to warn you guys that there is mention of violence in this chapter. however there are no violent scenes in this update. I hope you like it despite the material discussed.

lastly if you or someone you know is being abused visit **thehotline** and call the number on their website. there is help for you out there :)

Jane sat in the passenger seat of Mike's car as they drove to Lizzie's house. After Max said that her house wasn't an option for somewhere to go since both her parents and her brother were home Lizzie offered up her house. Jane tried not to notice that Lizzie didn't give Mike directions to her address, and he didn't ask. After that no one said a word for the rest of the ride. She could feel all three pairs of eyes watching her but refused to acknowledge any of them. She was embarrassed, terrified, and guilty all at the same time. At some point she knew she would have to call home to tell her mother she was safe, since it was only a matter of time before her parents found her bedroom empty.

When they walked inside a woman, likely Lizzie's mother said hello to all of them. She introduced herself to Jane and then went on about "Michale you've grown so much" and "I remember when we moved in, you were so little" and "remember when you two used to play together" before they escaped upstairs. Instead of focusing on anything else that had happened that day Jane concentrated on the blush that had appeared on Mike's cheeks after talking to Lizzie's mom.

"How does she know you?" She asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Jane watched his cheeks get redder. "I live down the street. Our moms are friends."

The thought of being down the street from Mike's house, the place

where he lived and spent the majority of his time, was one of the few things that had managed to cheer her up. She wished she had payed more attention on the ride over. If she had maybe she could have actually seen his house. Jane made a mental note to keep her eyes peeled for a mailbox with the name *Wheeler* painted on it once she left.

When they got up to Lizzie's room she closed and locked the door. She sat on her desk while Max took the chair in front of her, leaving the only other available spot for Jane and Mike on her bed. As silence fell over them all once again she could feel the inevitable questions coming. She hated that she couldn't have gotten away with keeping everything a secret for just a little bit longer.

The first one to break the silence was Mike. Though being around him instantly made her feel better no matter what she, at the same time, was mortified that he was there. Max and Lizzie knew the tip of the iceberg, but she had made a conscious effort to make sure he didn't know anything about her dad. "Does that hurt?" He asked, pointing at the bruise on her jaw that had popped up a few hours before.

"No." She lied. The worry in his face was unbearable, and she knew telling the truth would only make it worse. Though she had a feeling the lie was pathetic. Everyone on earth knew that bruises hurt.

"Jane, what's going on?" Lizzie asked her, both her and Max wearing an almost identical expression to Mike's. "You can tell us."

As if she read her mind Max then chimed in "And don't sugarcoat it to make us feel better."

Her eyes fell down to the floor. The tears that she had been fighting back all day started to well up in her eyes yet again. She blinked until they dried out. Jane wasn't quite ready to loose it just yet, especially not with Mike there. When she looked back up they were all still starring at her, waiting for her to say something. She knew there was no way she could get out of explaining things.

Jane let out a shaky breath, avoiding their gazes when she finally spoke. "My dad has... been in jail since October." The words tasted

bitter in her mouth and she wanted to pull them back in the second she left. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Lizzie and Max glance at one another before they looked back at her. God she hated the sympathy. It had filled up the room so much she felt as if she was drowning. "We moved here to get away from him."

"Why?" Max asked, her voice the softest Jane had ever heard it. She was so used to her friends tough demeanor and desperately wished she would put it back on.

"He went to jail because he was hitting my mom." She wrapped her arms around herself, the familiar feeling of a pre-cry soar throat overcoming her. "We kept it a secret for years, but he did it when I had a friend over once. She told her mom and her mom called the cops."

Jane remembered opening the door to find two police officers standing on her porch. Any hope of lying to them was squashed when she realized the sound of her parents arguing could be heard all the way from the front hallway. Once he was taken away in handcuffs Jane's mom wrapped her up in a hug, a bright red handprint on her cheek, and told her that they were going to figure out a plan. This was their escape.

"He was supposed to be locked up until July." She said, wiping her nose on her sleeve. "But they said there was overcrowding, and he had been a 'model prisoner' and all that bullshit."

Jane's voice got stuck in her throat, preventing her from saying much more. It was getting harder and harder to fight back tears. She felt Mike put his hand on her back, which only made her want to cry more. All she wanted was to wrap her arms around him and hide from everything that didn't exist outside of Lizzie's bedroom. She wanted to get back in his car and have him drive her far, far away from Hawkins. But she knew they were still waiting for her to explain more.

"He showed up last night and just completely freaked out. He started throwing things and screaming, and wouldn't let either of us leave this morning. That's why I wasn't at school." Jane's head perked up, her eyes instinctively meeting Mike's. "If he finds out I snuck out he's

going to freak out all over again. He'll take it out on her."

His hand moved from her back to her arm. "We're not going to let that happen, okay?" He told her. "We'll call the cops and he'll go back to jail. He's not going to get away with what he's doing."

Minutes later Lizzie was on the phone with Chief Hopper, pretending to be Jane's neighbor and complaining about a disturbance next door. "He's been yelling and screaming at them since last night and I just don't want someone to get hurt." She said into the receiver. Moments later she looked up at Jane and nodded. "Thank you so much Chief. I heard this guy just got out of jail, and I don't want some crazy ex con anywhere near my kids. Okay, bye." She hung up the phone, then set it back down on her desk. "He's going there right now."

She nodded, still hugging herself. "Is it okay if I stay here for a little? I just don't want to go home yet."

"Yeah of course." She said, "You can stay for as long as you want."

Max leaned back in her chair. "I'm staying too." She told her. "No way I'm leaving you after all of this."

"I'm staying too." Mike said, looked up at Lizzie and added "If that's okay."

She shook her head, "It's fine." She told him. "My mom loves you, it won't be a problem."

The first to call home was Max, letting her parents know that she would be spending the night at Lizzie's house. She rolled her eyes before promising whoever was on the other line that she would go to sleep at a reasonable time and get a ride to school the next morning. Once she hung up Mike dialed Dustin's number first. He asked him to cover for him should his mom ask if he was over at his house. When he started asking questions Mike kept his explanation to a bare minimum, saying that he would tell him more later but that something happened with Jane. He then called his own house, telling his mom that he was at Dustin's and he wasn't sure what time he would be home.

After he hung up for a second time Lizzie and Max went downstairs to tell her mom a brief summary of what had happened, leaving Mike and Jane alone in her room. She was still sitting on her bed while Mike stood by the phone. "I'm sorry." She said after a few silent moments passed

"What are you talking about?" He asked, pushing himself off of the desk and walking over to her. "Why are you sorry?"

She looked up at him, still feeling tears fighting to break loose. "I just really didn't want you to find out about any of this yet. And I don't want you to see me like this."

Mike kneeled down in front of her so they were eye level and held onto her hands. "Jane, you don't have to be sorry." He said. "In case you didn't notice I *really* like you. Something like this isn't going to change that."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really." He said. "I think you're awesome, and I wanna get to know everything about you, even the bad stuff."

Jane felt her bottom lip start to shake. This whole time she had been worried sick about what would happen if Mike found out, her mind thinking of the worst. Yet there he was, telling her he *really* liked her and that he thought she was awesome. The first tear rolled down her cheek, which she quickly wiped away. It was only followed by two, then three more. She wrapped her arms around his neck and gave up on trying to hold them back.

He held her as she finally let out everything she'd been holding in since her dad went to jail. She had, for so long, refused to cry over someone that had treated both her and her mom so terribly. But she couldn't hold it in any longer. Her body started to shake from trying to keep her crying to a minimum. She thought of herself as an ugly cryer and didn't want to completely open the floodgates. Mike rubbed her back and didn't say a word. He didn't need to. Just having him with her was comfort enough.

When the tears finally stopped falling she pulled away just enough to

look at him, keeping her hands on his shoulders. Her thumb rubbed against the tear stained spot she had left on the collar of his shirt. "Sorry." She said weakly.

"It'll dry." He told her, getting up and sitting back on the bed next to her. "I'm not worried about my shirt, I'm worried about you." Mike reached for her hand, wrapping it around her own. "This is a lot to deal with all by yourself."

Jane sniffled quietly, "I've been doing it for years." She told him. Ever since she was in middle school she had spent nearly ever ounce of energy trying to keep the way her dad treated her a secret from everyone. She'd gotten so good at it that she couldn't believe someone had found out a second time.

"Yeah but you don't have to anymore." He said, squeezing her hand lightly. "We're gonna be here for you okay. You don't have to keep things like this a secret anymore."

She forced a small smile. Though she knew he was trying to be comforting the thought was terrifying. Jane had never *completely* let someone in before. Not even her best friends from upstate knew everything about the situation. Thinking of being totally open with Lizzie or Max, especially Mike, was one of the scariest parts about the whole thing.

xXx

Hours later the sky had fallen dark and the room was filled with the sound of Lizzie's soft breathing as she slept. She and Max, both fast asleep, had taken her bed. Two sleeping bags were laid out on the floor, where Mike and Jane lay facing one another. Neither of them had fallen asleep yet and spoke quietly so they wouldn't wake up the other girls.

"What time is it?" Jane asked, suddenly curious

Mike sat up just enough to see the alarm clock sitting on Lizzie's nightstand. "Almost 2 AM." He whispered, laying back down. "Are you tired yet."

"No." She said. After everything that had happened she was sure she was in for another sleepless night. "Are you?"

"No."

They both fell quiet for a few moments, staring at one another through the dark. Jane still couldn't quite believe that he liked her. He was adorable and funny and dorky, she was much too bland to be with someone like him. Mike's smile could light up the entire room and she felt dull in comparison. Every time he touched her it was as if she was being blinded.

"Can we go outside?" She asked him, "I want to get some fresh air."

He nodded and they both got to their feet, sneaking out of Lizzie's room and down the stairs. They went out the back door, sitting on the porch steps in her yard. Jane was thankful for the mid April Indiana weather that didn't force them to wear jackets. She purposely sat close enough to him to make their legs and shoulders touch, yet she still didn't feel close enough. She had to remind herself that crawling into his lap in her friends backyard was probably not the best or most appropriate idea.

"I wish that none of this had happened." She said, still quiet despite the fact they no longer had to worry about waking her friends. "That I could worry about normal teenage girl things."

Mike raised an eyebrow at her. "Like what?" He asked, "I'm not exactly an expert on teenage- girl related things."

Jane smiled, which felt good to do. She could almost forget about the craziness that had been going on in her house the past 24 hours. Almost. Being with Mike was surprisingly easy, and she was still so taken with him that she could so effortlessly focus on only him. Half the time she spent way too much effort trying to focus on something *other* than Mike. "I don't know, like what I should wear tomorrow, or if I need to get a haircut. Or if the cute guy in English has noticed the bad test grade I got because I was too busy paying attention to him instead of the teacher."

"*What?*" She cringed slightly, having anticipated a bad reaction from

him. "Jane, are you serious?"

She shrugged, "English isn't my best subject anyway." She told him, trying to not make it sound like a big deal. "And a C+ isn't the worst grade in the world."

His expression softened ever so slightly. "A C+, damn that's what I have for the whole class." He said, "Maybe lower now."

"Why?"

Her eyes had adjusted to the dark well enough to see his cheeks turned pink. "Because the cute girl next to me is just way too distracting."

Jane grinned at him, reaching for his hand. "Maybe we'll both fail the class and end up in the same one for senior year."

"That doesn't even sound like that much of a bad idea." He said, mirroring her smile. Only it looked ten times better on him. "At least if you still sit next to me, it doesn't."

"Of course."

Jane was overcome with the same feeling she'd had after he dropped her off from the park. A feeling she was starting to experience more and more. Though she knew she would easily get used to it she knew that it was dangerous. She looked over at him, the porch light casting shadows across his face, only to find he was already looking at her. The corners of his lips turned up when she turned towards him. God he was too damn adorable.

Though they were already sitting close enough to touch she inched closer to him. "Thank you for everything you've done today." She said. "I mean totally dropping everything and sneaking me out of my house, then spending the night with us."

Mike shrugged, his shoulder moving against her own. "You don't have to thank me." He said, clearly not as impressed with his actions as she was. "I want to do what I can to help you."

Jane wanted to point out that they hadn't even known each other for

a month. That he still didn't know that much about her, and she knew even less about him. She wanted to ask how he could feel so strongly and so protective over someone he'd known for such a short period of time. But she already knew the answer. If she had found out something just as terrible about Mike's family situation she would have done everything she could to get him out and get him safe.

Her heart started to pound as the feeling started bubbling up more and more in the bottom of her stomach. *He's sitting so close*, she thought to herself, *it would be so easy*. Jane took a quick breath through her nose and closed the small space between them, pressing her lips against his.

She felt his hand slip away from hers moments before he rested it on her cheek. Jane was sure he would be able to feel the warmth from her blush coated face but found that she didn't mind the idea. Bit by bit she was becoming less embarrassed or self conscious around him, which was an amazing feeling. The whole time she'd been worried that she would do the wrong thing and he wouldn't want to be her friend anymore. But he'd made it clear that he liked her as more than a friend despite what he had just learned about her.

Jane moved her hand and put it on his shoulder, suddenly realizing it had been resting on his leg since he moved to hold her face. Her cheeks started to burn with embarrassment but she didn't try to pull away. She could feel him smiling against her lips, causing her to do the same. Despite everything that had happened over the past day Jane didn't think she had ever smiled so wide her entire life. Just for a moment nothing existed outside of Lizzie's backyard. It was just her, Mike, and the 50 square feet that surrounded them. Not to mention that in those 50 square feet she was kissing Mike Wheeler. Not just a little peck, but a *real* kiss. She would have gladly stayed there forever.

16. Chapter 16: Mike

want to thank everyone for reading and reviewing my last chapter, and enjoying it despite the heavy topic. I have reached out to personally thank, hopefully, every non best review. for for everyone who didn't receive one/left a guest review thank you :) also over a *hundred* reviews! you guys are blowing my mind!

Before Mike even opened his eyes he could feel a sharp pain shooting up his spine. He groaned and rolled over onto his side. What the hell happened last night? His eyes opened, landing on Jane. She lay only inches away on her side facing him and still fast asleep. A soft smile spread across his face at the sight. She looked so peaceful and adorable. But Mike's smile fell as he caught sight of the bruise still on her cheek, the memories of the night before rushing back to him.

His view of her sleeping face was clouded by the image of her looking scared out of her mind as they tried to coax her out of her bedroom window. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and never let go but, at the same time, he didn't want to wake her up. They had stayed up way later than they should have for a school night and she needed to get as much sleep as possible. So instead he brushed his thumb against the bruise, as light as he could. His stomach churned with the realization that it was darker than it had been the night before.

He propped himself up on his elbows and glanced at the clock behind him. 6:25 AM. Mike forced himself to his feet, knowing that school was starting in an hour and a half. Max was still sleeping, tangled up in the blankets. Lizzie, on the other hand, was nowhere in sight. He closed the door behind him on his way out and tiptoed down the stairs. Thankfully he remembered the lay out of her house well enough to find the kitchen.

When he walked in he instantly spotted Lizzie sitting at the kitchen table, rubbing her eyes. Her hands then dropped in her lap and Mike saw that she looked just as tired as he felt. She looked up, her gaze landing on him and a weak smile spreading on her face. "Hey."

"Hey." He said, walking over and sitting in the chair next to her. "Did you sleep?" Though he had a feeling he already knew the answer he asked anyway

She shrugged. "Sort of. I've been up since 4:30, though." Mike noticed the shadows that had settled under his eyes and wondered if he had any of his own already. "Did you?"

"I fell asleep a little after 3." He told her. Mike glanced around the kitchen, remembering the last time he'd been there. They were in second grade and his mom had dropped him off so she could take Nancy to dance classes. Lizzie's mom made them grilled cheese and they made a blanket fort in the living room after they ate. The change in circumstances for his stay out her house were shocking. "This is just... crazy."

Though he was vague she nodded her head, seeming to understand exactly what he was saying. "Yeah, I know." She crossed her arms across her stomach. "It makes me sick that she had to go through all of that, and that she was too scared to tell anyone."

"Me too." He said. It was as if she took the words right out of his mouth. "And now we have to go to school and pretend like everything fine."

Lizzie laughed, but it lacked any sort of humor. "It's just..." she leaned forward again and rested her elbows on the table. "It's such *bullshit*. Everything's not fine. We shouldn't have to act like it is."

Silence fell over the room. At the crack of dawn Maple Street was void of a any sign of life, and they seemed to be the only two people awake in the house. Mike had half a mind to skip school that day, but the idea of not being there for Jane put the thought immediately out of his mind. Though his grades were already not up to par he knew that he could only show up that day. Any hope he had of functioning normally was lost the second she told them what was going on.

Lizzie suddenly pushed her chair out, getting to her feet and walking over to the fridge. "Are you hungry?" She asked him, yanking the door open

"A little." He admitted

She pulled a box of Eggos out of the freezer and brought them over to the toaster. After popping four in she put two plates down on the counter then sat back down next to him. "I just keep thinking about what would have happened if we hadn't gotten her out of there."

Mike had wondered the same thing, and told her what he told himself to push the thought out of his mind. "But we did." He said. "Worrying about that is just a waste of your energy."

She let out a small sigh. "You're right." Lizzie said. "Still."

"I know."

They sat in a surprisingly comfortable silence until the waffles jumped up in the toaster. With the now full plates in front of them they forced themselves to talk about school. They laughed about ridiculous things their teachers had said and talked about their frustrations with Troy. With a bitter feeling Mike realized he didn't seem to discriminate his tormenting by gender.

Once they finished eating they looked at the clock and decided it was time to wake up the other two girls. Mike gently shook Jane's shoulders while Lizzie was a bit more rough with Max. The red haired girl groaned and rolled onto her stomach and had to be lured out of bed with the promise of breakfast. Jane's eyes only started to flutter open when the two left the room. A hint of a smile spread on her face before she sat up.

"How are you feeling?" He asked her as she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes.

She shrugged, "I'm okay." Jane said, turning to face him and grabbing his hand. "I'm glad you stayed."

He felt the corners of his lips turning up. "Me too."

With the hand that wasn't holding onto his she grabbed a mirror off of Lizzie's desk and looked at her reflection. She frowned at the sight of the bruise that had gotten darker over night. "Damn it." She muttered, setting it back in its spot.

"What happened?" Mike asked her. Though he could make a general guess he wanted to hear exactly what happened, despite how much it might hurt to hear.

Jane sighed quietly. "He didn't mean to do it." She said. "He was throwing everything he could get his hands on. He threw a book and it hit me, but he wasn't aiming for me." Mike's heart twisted and ached, his mind forcing himself to picture the altercation. She looked over at him, her eyebrows coming together. "Mike, it's fine."

"It's not fine."

She shook her head. "I guess not, but *I'm* fine. That's what matters." Jane turned to face him, putting her hands on his shoulders. "Seeing how much you and Max and Lizzie care about me cancels it out."

Mike smiled a little bit again. "You promise?"

"I promise." She leaned towards him and planted a short kiss on his lips, both of them secretly worried about the possibility of morning breath. "What time is it?"

"Seven." He told her. "Lizzie's making breakfast."

Jane nodded and he helped her to her feet. She held onto his hand as they went downstairs and into the kitchen. Mike noticed both Lizzie and Max's gaze glance down at their hands but neither mentioned it. He had a feeling if the circumstances were different they would have teased them relentlessly, but they remained silent for now. As they ate they talked about anything other than what had happened the night before.

Once they were done eating Max and Jane borrowed a change of clothes from Lizzie since no one had been prepared to spend the night. After they got dressed Lizzie let Jane borrow some of her make up to cover the bruise. Before heading to school Mike stopped at his house and changed his own clothes. He was thankful that his dad had already left for work and his mom would likely still be asleep.

That just left Nancy.

She was home from college for spring break for about a week. Even

when she didn't have school she was an early riser. When he walked through the front door she was sitting in the living room, still wearing her pajamas and sipping from a mug as she watched the morning news. He could feel the questioning look she was giving him when he walked in, but he ignored it and went upstairs. After changing into different clothes and brushing his teeth he went back down, finding her standing in front of the window.

When she heard him coming back down she turned towards him. "Am I delusional or are there *three girls* in your car?"

Mike felt his cheeks turning red at how surprised she sounded. He did *not* have time for this. "They're just friends.

"All of them?" When he didn't answer her right away her eyebrows climbed higher up on her forehead. "Oh my god, Mike! Tell me everything."

"I can't okay?" He said, starting towards the door. "I have to go to school."

She followed him out onto the front porch, stopping before she stepped on the grass since she was barefoot. "Fine, but when you get home we're going to talk."

He rolled his eyes as he walked the short distance to his car. The three girls inside had their eyes glued on Nancy as she turned and walked back into the house. When Mike got back into the drivers seat Jane looked away from the house and over at him. "Was that your sister?"

"Yeah." He said, starting the car and pulling out of the driveway. "She's really annoying."

xXx

As they walked up to the school Max and Lizzie told Jane and they would catch up with her later and that everything would be fine before they went in the opposite direction, likely to their lockers. Mike could feel the curious stares of a few people who took notice to the fact that he had just walked into school with three girls, not to

mention how close he and Jane were standing to one another. He could practically hear their thoughts; "what kind of girl could ever like Frogface Wheeler?" Normally the opinions of others would have bothered him more but his mind was focused on Jane and only Jane.

Arriving at her locker he leaned on the next one over from hers. After putting in the combination she looked over at him. "You promise you still like me?" She asked. Despite the small smile she had on he could see genuine worry in her eyes

"Yeah of course." He said easily. If he was being 100 percent honest the whole situation made him like her more. Seeing her hurt made him realize just how much he cared about her and that he felt somewhat protective over her. And knowing how strong she must have been to go through everything just made him admire her more. "Why wouldn't I?"

Jane shrugged, looking back at the books in her locker as she took them out. "I don't know." She said. "I'm just always worried that people will think of me differently if they found out."

"Well, I think of you differently now, but not in a bad way." He explained. "I could never go through any of that and still be as awesome as you."

She gave him a light shove, rolling her eyes at him. "Shut up." She said. He couldn't help but notice the pink tint of her cheeks.

"Jane, I mean it."

She slipped on her backpack, looking over at him again. "Well I think you're awesome too." She said, shutting her locker. "Even without all of the baggage."

As they walked through the halls, heading towards homeroom, she linked her arm through his. They received twice as many looks but Jane seemed unbothered. It was one thing for her to hold his hand alone in the park or in the privacy of his car, but it was another thing entirely to be affectionate with him while the whole school was around. He wondered if she was aware of the sort of backlash she could get if people knew how she felt about him, but was too afraid

to ask.

When they walked into homeroom Mike spotted his friends all facing one another, deep in conversation. Spotting the two entering the room Will nodded in their direction. All three boys heads turned towards them, causing Mike's cheeks to catch on fire. He looked over at Jane, seeing that she didn't seem to notice. Once they got to their seats she smiled at him and took the seat she normally did, Mike sliding into the one behind her. He could feel his friends eyes starring him down, waiting for him to say anything. But he remained silent.

"So," Dustin started, the first one to speak up. "Why exactly did I have to cover for you last night?"

Mike glanced over at him, "I'll tell you later." He told them, despite the fact he already knew he wouldn't end up telling them everything that had happened

"You must have been up to something special since you couldn't tell your mom where you really were."

He rolled his eyes, his cheeks feeling even warmer. "I *said* I'll tell you later."

When he looked forward again he spotted Jane with her head turned in his direction enough that he could see half of her face. She had a grin on her face and quickly turned away when the other three boys looked at her. For the rest of homeroom they talked about a new movie that was coming out, but Mike could tell that all they wanted to do was ask him about what happened with Jane.

17. Chapter 17: Jane

This chapter is a little on the shorter side since it's mostly just setting up for the next chapter, so bear with me! I promise that future chapters will be longer (which I can guarantee because I've prewritten a ridiculous amount of chapters) than this one

After school Jane sat at the kitchen table next to her mother, the sun setting outside of the window. When she walked through the front door she was instantly scooped up into a hug, squeezed tight while her mother cried and told her she was so worried. Despite the fact that she had called her mom the night before, almost an hour after they called the police, and let her know where she was she still seemed upset. Jane didn't blame her.

She felt incredibly guilty about leaving her mother alone in the house with him, and then leaving her alone even after he was taken away. But she couldn't bring herself to go back, and she didn't think her friends would have even taken her back. Jane tried to put words to the guilt she felt and reasoning for her actions yet nothing she said seemed to quite articulate what she was trying to say. But her mother, characteristically, knew exactly what she meant and told her everything was okay. As they sat in the kitchen table eating bowls of ice cream, which happened to be both of their comfort foods, Jane tried to fight back tears at the sight of bruises and cuts scattered across her face.

Terry told her everything that had happened after she snuck out of the house. Neither she nor her dad had any clue that Jane had left with her friends until her dad was taken away and her mom finally went up to her room. She told her how he would likely bail himself out soon but that she was working on an order of protection in the mean time. Jane had to make a conscious effort to not to let her eyes linger on the bruise under her moms eye while she talked, which was bigger and darker than her own.

"Where did you go?" Her mom asked once she finished telling her what had happened

Jane told her how her friends had climbed onto the roof of her garage and how they had gone to Lizzie's afterwards. She told her about Mike (sparing her the details having to do with kissing) and swore that she had planned to tell her about him the night her dad showed up. The tears she had been fighting back started to roll down her cheeks as she repeated what Mike had told her, that he thought she was awesome and strong and still liked her even after finding out about her dad. She had, for so long, been afraid of opening up in fear of hearing the opposite. It was as if a hundred pounds had been lifted off her shoulders after hearing what he said, and that he sounded so genuine.

"This is the same guy who you were studying with last week?" She asked her. Though by the look on her face Jane could tell she already knew the answer.

"Yes." She admitted. "I really like him, Mama."

Her mom's face spread into a smile as she placed a hand on her arm. "I can tell you do." She said. Jane knew her mom wasn't stupid, and she had more than thirty years of experience of dealing with boys. She had a feeling her mom knew how she felt about Mike the second she told her he was going to show her around town. "Tell me about him."

"He's so nice to me." She said, her cheeks starting to feel warm. "He looks at me like I'm something special, and I feel special when I'm around him. I've never felt this way about a boy before. It's like he's a species all of his own."

Terry laughed, "He sounds great. Good boyfriend material."

"*Mama*." Jane whined, "He's not my boyfriend."

"But you want him to be?"

Jane pursed her lips slightly. Her and Mike had yet to talk about exactly what they were, but she knew what she wanted them to be. Though he had told her several times already that he had feelings for her Jane wondered if he was one of those guys that 'don't like labeled relationships' and all of that crap. She had a few friends who had

been fed that excuse and she, frankly, thought it was bullshit. Though she didn't think Mike was that kind of guy the worry was still present in the back of her mind. She couldn't help but wonder if her mind would ever be able to fully relax and stop worrying all the time. "I mean... yeah."

"Then you need to tell him that." She said. "Are you guys going to talk about what's going on between you?"

She shrugged, "We were supposed to go to dinner yesterday. But then everything kind of... took a different turn."

Her mom nodded a few times. "Okay. Then call him. Set up another time to meet up."

"Okay." She said, resting her elbows on the table.

Jane could feel her mom's eyes watching her closely, though she had no idea what was on her mind. She waited silently for her to say something or to get up and move. A few moments passed and nothing happened. Jane turned her head just enough to look back at her mom.

"Well," Terry asked. "Are you gonna call him?"

She raised an eyebrow at her, "What, right now?"

"Yes!" Her mom said, getting to her feet and waking over to the counter. "No better time than the present." She grabbed the yellow pages and brought it over with her.

Jane looked down at the book and back up at her mom, her face feeling even warmer. "I already have his number written down." She mumbled.

Terry grinned at her, putting the book back down where it had been. Jane couldn't help but smile back a little as she stood up and started towards the stairs. Things with Mike were moving faster than she could have expected. But she didn't exactly mind. She fell for him twice as fast. Jane felt a bit like she was on a rollercoaster and had just let go of the handlebars. Only she had never been a fan of rollercoasters, and was definitely a fan of Mike, so the comparison

didn't exactly do him justice.

Jane sat on her bed, looking down at the slip of paper with Mike's phone number in her hand. A smile spread on her face before she even picked up the phone, hearing his voice in her head. She punched in the numbers, counting each ring that came through the speaker. The change in how relaxed she was compared to how nervous she was the first time she called him. The more time she spent with him the more comfortable and less self conscious she felt, which was something she never imagined would happen. She still remembered, clear as day, the explosion of butterflies and pounding in her chest she felt the first time they talked.

The phone rang four times before someone picking up, a female voice speaking up. "Hello?" She asked. Jane tried to remember his mothers voice, but couldn't well enough to tell if it was her.

"Yeah, hi, is Mike there?"

"Yeah he is." The voice responded, the curiously added "Who's this?"

She picked the phone off of her nightstand and set it in her lap as she leaned back against the headboard. "This is Jane." She said, "I'm a friend of his."

"Oh, hi Jane." They said, "He was talking about you not that long ago. I'll go get him."

Jane felt the temperature of her face skyrocket to dangerous heights. She bit down on her bottom lip as the voice on the other phone called out, faintly as if they were standing far away from the receiver, "Mike, phone! It's Jane!" A few moments later the voice returned, closer this time, and said "He'll pick up on the other line in one second."

"Thank you."

She counted all the way to seven before she heard noise from the speaker, followed by what was clearly Mike's voice. "Okay, you can hang up, Nancy."

"Okay, okay, bye." The girl, who Jane now realized it was, said before

hanging up

She couldn't help but smile. "That was your sister?" Jane asked. His sister was much more likely to let out that he'd been talking about her than his mother was.

"Yeah, it was." He told her. "I'm glad you called, I wanted to call you but I didn't have your number." Jane briefly considered bringing up what Nancy had said and asking if that was what he'd been talking about but quickly decided to keep the information to herself. "How's your mom?"

Despite the fact that he couldn't see her she shrugged her shoulders. "She's okay. Glad I'm home and he's not."

"Good." Mike said, and after a short pause continued. "How are you?"

"I'm *fine*." She assured him for the hundredth time that day. Though she didn't mind his repeated question one bit. The fact that he was worried about her showed that he cared, and she would never dream of anything else. "I promise."

"Okay, I'm just checking."

Jane bit down on her lip to suppress a smile, as if anyone was around to see it. She looked over at her window where she had looked up to find him, surprisingly, only 24 hours ago. It felt like so much longer than just a day. "So, you know how we were going to go to Benny's yesterday?"

"Yeah."

"And you know how something... came up?"

He paused for a moment and she could almost see the worried expression on his face at the topic being brought back up, despite how vague she was being. If anyone else was so openly worried about her, and continued to bring it up as much as he had, she likely would have gotten annoyed. But he just looked so *cute* that it was impossible to be annoyed. "Yeah."

Jane twirled the phone cord around her finger, her eyes now fixed on

the spot on her bed where he had been almost a week ago. She still couldn't quite believe they had been alone in her room, with the *door closed*. "Well I still really want to go." She said, "Maybe we could go sometime this week?"

"Yeah, sure." He said, "When is good for you?"

"Tomorrow?"

Normally she would have required a bit more time to prepare herself for the conversation they were bound to have, and fully process what was going on between them. But she had been feeling particularly reckless since she met him. Her whole life she had tried to be the perfect, white picket fence ready, daughter. The thought of being anything else, and consequentially upsetting her dad, had completely outweighed the perks of being a normal teenager. But her father was, for the time being, completely out of the way. And her mom seemed to understand exactly what was going on. Jane, for what may have been the first time, felt like an exceptionally normal teenager. Having a crush on a boy (and actually doing something about it), sneaking out, hanging out with the friends she had made frequently. And she felt free. It was as if she'd been locked in a box her whole life and moving to Hawkins had been the key. Jane could finally stretch and do whatever she pleased because there was no longer anything holding her back. If she hadn't been so scared of bird from a bad experience with eating lunch at the beach she would have compared herself to one.

Normally she wouldn't have made such sudden plans. But she wasn't exactly feeling like her normal self.

"Tomorrow sounds good." Mike told her. She wondered if she could really hear the smile in his voice or if she was just imagining it. "We can go straight after school."

"That sounds good."

They said goodnight to one another before hanging up, leaving Jane's stomach feeling like a butterfly bush in the middle of spring.

One thing she hated about when people described falling for someone

was when they said "he's my whole world". Mike was not her whole world. There were a million trillion things that made up the world of Jane Ives. But after moving to Hawkins it was as if those million trillion things had all been covered in a light dusting of Mike Wheeler. Things she had done a million times before she met him were now suddenly so connected him. When she ate dinner she thought about sitting in Benny's with Mike. When she studied she thought about doing her homework with Mike. When she climbed into bed she looked at the clock and counted down the hours until she would walk into homeroom. He was not her whole world. But her world seemed to have a secret Mike Wheeler setting which she had turned on and didn't know how to turn off. And she didn't particularly want to.

18. Chapter 18: Mike

After those last few doozies of updates I think we all deserve some fluffy mileven. Also, as usual, thank you to everyone who has continued to read this story. I promise you're going to want to stick around, I got some things cooked up for future chapters.

Mike sat in his eighth period class, unable to sit still. Instead of working on the sheet of math problems the teacher had handed out half way through the period he starred at his open notebook where Jane had written down her phone number. Her handwriting was neat and curvy compared to his chicken scratch. When he turned to her in English to ask for her phone number he was surprised with himself at how nervous he was. She had his phone number, and they were almost-sort of dating. Getting her phone number made sense right?

"Yeah sure." She said, clicking her pen and grabbing his notebook. Mike watched her write down the numbers, always glad to have an opportunity to look at her when she wasn't paying attention to him. Once she was done she slid his notebook back over to him. "We're still going to Benny's today, right?"

He smiled at her, "Yeah of course." Mike told her. She instantly reflected the expression on his face.

Mike glanced up at the clock for what must have been the hundredth time that period. 3:13, *finally*. His eyes were glued on the clock, watching the second hand go around three more times before the sound of the bell filled the classroom. He jumped to his feet, grabbing all of his things and darting out of the classroom.

The hallway was swarming with students, the excitement of Friday afternoon buzzing. Though he was glad to be rid of classes for two days Mike found himself a bit disappointed. He would have to wait a whole *two days* to see Jane. Despite the fact that her dad was locked up, for the time being, Mike still wasn't thrilled about the idea of her being at home while her dad could get out at any second. Still, he doubted he would get to see her outside of school four days in a row.

He spotted her at her locker through the sea of other students, his stomach instantly doing a summersault at the sight of her. Jane had her hair tied up, something she didn't do very often but he loved. And the strands that had fallen loose and now framed her face, which made her look even better. The bruise on her cheek had faded enough that she didn't need to cover it up. It was now mostly light brown and had shrunk in size, both of which he was thankful for.

When Mike finally reached her Jane's face lit up, making his whole body feel warm. How was it possible for someone to have such a strong affect on him? She shut her locker and turned towards him, "Hey."

"Hey." He said, "You ready to go?"

She nodded, wrapping her arm around his as they started to walk. Instead of paying attention to where he was going and maneuvering the crowded hallway, Mike's gaze was locked on Jane out of the corner of his eye. Seeing her back in school felt right. Though she had only been gone one day it had been a hell of a day. As if she weren't already completely amazing she was holding onto him as they walked through the hallway, where everyone could see, and didn't seem to mind one bit.

Once they were outside and headed towards the parking lot she continued to hold onto him, even though there was no longer the chance of her getting lost in the crowd. She was touching him simple because she *wanted* to. Mike wondered if she could feel his body temperature rise at the thought.

"I'm really happy you're back." He told her as they approached his car. "And that you're okay."

She looked up at him, her lips spreading into a smile. "Me too."

As they reached his car he couldn't help but notice how routine it was becoming for her to be next to him as he drove. She had sat in the passengers seat more time in the past two weeks than his friends had. It was something he didn't at all mind, but was still surprised by. Mike sometimes had a hard time believing that a girl like Jane could ever feel the same way about him that he did for her. He often had to

remind himself that she had told him how she felt about him very bluntly and that both times they had kissed were her doing.

When they got to Benny's they slid into a booth and picked up the menus they were given shortly after. Over the top of his menu Mike continuously snuck glances at Jane, watching her eyes scan the words in front of her while she bit her bottom lip. She was absolutely precious. They chatted about their school days while they waited for a waitress to come and take their order. Mike ordered what he usually did and Jane got what she had the first time they went to Benny's.

As the waitress walked away Jane looked over at him, shifting in her seat slightly. "So I guess we should... talk."

"Yeah."

She rested her elbows on the table, "Have you ever done this before?"

Mike felt his face starting to get warm. He wasn't thrilled about his short list of dating experience and was equally unexcited to tell her about it. But he wasn't embarrassed enough to lie about it to make himself look better, which seemed like a stupid idea anyway. "No, not really." He admitted, "Have you?"

"Sort of?" She said, the statement coming out more like a question. "I dated one guy before, but I was thirteen and we never even hung out by ourselves. There was always other people around. So it doesn't really count."

He couldn't help but feel a bit relieved that she didn't have much more dating history. "Yeah, I guess not."

Jane sighed quietly, resting her chin on her hand. "Lizzie told me to 'not be afraid' and to 'just tell him how you feel' and all of that crap." She said, her voice mimicking her blond haired friend. "But I *am* scared."

"Why?"

"Because telling someone how you feel about them is scary." Jane explained, "And not because of anything you're doing but because I'm

scared of being honest and vulnerable." She paused for a moment, her eyebrows coming together. "I said the word 'because' too many times." She said, cringing slightly

Mike was surprised how she had taken the words right out of his mouth. Despite the fact that he knew she liked him, and he had told her more than once that he felt the same way, the thought of telling her just how deeply he cared for her was terrifying. He already knew he was falling hard and quick and he didn't want her to be discouraged by it. But he also knew that if he didn't tell her she would likely be able to figure it out on her own. By that logic there was no sense in hiding it.

"I know what you mean." He said. Her whole face seemed to light up at the fact that he understood, which was surely a sight for sore eyes. "Plus you have all this stuff with your dad going on and I don't want to add any kind of stress on you by doing this."

Jane immediately shook her head. "You're not." She promised. "Believe me, this is the best possible distraction from that whole mess."

Her reassurance was, needless to say, a relief. After everything with her dad, and the fact that he had shown up again, she had a lot to deal with. The absolute last thing he wanted was to make the situation worse. He searched her face for any sign that she was lying but, thankfully, found nothing. "Okay." Mike said after a moment had passed, "Good."

She smiled at him, causing his stomach to do a backflip. "So what do you want to do?"

"What do *you* want to do?"

Jane raised an eyebrow at him, clearly seeing how he tried to deflect the attention back to her. "I asked you first."

"Well I want to do whatever you want to do." He said, which was the truth. Though he obviously had a preference he would still go with whatever she wanted.

She stared at him for a moment, waiting for him to say something more. When he remained silent she let out a short breath, her eyes landing on the table. "Okay. Well, I like you, and I like hanging out with you. And I want to get to know you more." Jane lifted her eyes up from the table to meet his. "Your turn." She said, "And *don't* say 'whatever you want', or anything like that. Tell me what *you* want."

Mike thought for a moment, weighing the pros and cons of telling the whole truth. He had a feeling she was holding something back, likely in fear of making a fool of herself. If both of them kept something to themselves then things were never going to progress as much as they could. He just had to suck it up and tell her, despite how nerve wracking or embarrassing the whole truth might be.

"I want you to be my girlfriend." He told her. Mike watched her face, his anxiety slowly melting away as she started to smile. If the table wasn't separating them he would have had a hard time keeping himself from kissing her.

"Really?"

The hopeful expression she wore tempted him to disregard the separation and just kiss her anyway. He was tall enough that he could have reached her if he stood up and leaned across the table. But Mike reminded himself that they were having a somewhat serious conversation and that he could kiss her later. "Yeah, really." He said, "I mean, if that's what you want. But if you don't it's fine."

"No, I do." Jane said quickly. "That's exactly what I want."

They grinned at each other, both completely love sick with one another. Mike felt as if he was walking on air. Everything about Jane was almost too good to be true. Part of him kept waiting for the other shoe to drop and for something to go wrong, like most things in his life did. But she was so full of kindness and positive energy that he hoped the negativity of Hawkins and the majority of the people in it couldn't have any sort of affect on her.

Their food arrived shortly after their talk and the topic easily shifted to school once more. Jane started talking about the book they were assigned to read in English, which he had been assigned as well, *the*

Catcher in the Rye. She told him that she'd read it the year before in her old school and started to tell him an in depth summary of the story after he joked that she would no doubt get a better grade than anyone in the class. Mike had a bit of trouble paying attention to the crazy chain of events of Holden Caulfield she recapped for him, instead focusing on how she started telling the story with passion. He could easily tell she enjoyed the book and he thoroughly enjoyed watching her talk about something she felt strongly about.

"Are you sure I'm not boring you?" She would periodically ask. The fifth time she voiced her worry about the story bother him she had just started telling him about Holden going to his little sisters school

"No, keep going." He said quickly, eager to hear the end of the story since he could feel it coming to a close

When she finally stopped talking, looking up from her now empty plate and watching for his reaction, Mike could feel his heart sink slightly. "Thats it?"

"Yeah, that's it." She said

"That's not an *ending*!" Mike protested, "There's no closure. What happens to him? And where is he?" Surely there must have been some kind of epilogue or sequel. Some kind of ending that explains everything that happened.

But Jane shrugged, "That's how it ends." She assured him. "But I kind of like the ending. It lets you imagine anything you want for Holden in the future."

While they waited for the check, and even as they walked out to Mike's car, they discussed possible outcomes and alternative endings for the book. They both agreed on one thing; the after everything Holden had been through he deserved a happier ending than the ambiguous one they were given. When they got in his car neither of them seemed quite ready to part ways, so they decided to drive somewhere where they could continue to talk.

Mike drove down to Sattler's Quarry, parking as close as they could before they had to get out of the car and walk the rest of the

way. Jane stood close to him as they walked the semi-short distance from the car to the destination, eventually grabbing his hand. When they finally reached the quarry Jane's mouth dropped as she peered down at the drop.

"They should set up some kind of barrier so stupid kids don't get to close to it." She said, her eyes glued to it

Like stupid kids they sat down on a rock only a handful of feet from the edge, just far enough away that their stomachs didn't twist and turn at the threat of being so close to danger. They sat with their legs touching one another and stared at the view in front of them. Being so close to something so huge made him feel impossibly small in a way that was oddly calming. Yet as he looked over at Jane sitting next to him he knew that she was the biggest and most significant thing he could ever imagine. The quarry was nothing compared to Jane Ives.

She spotted him watching her, her face spreading into a smile as she turned to look back at him. "What?"

"Nothing." He said, shrugging. "Just you."

Jane raised an eyebrow at him, her smile growing ever so slightly. "Just me?"

"Well, not *just* you." Mike explained, though it likely didn't make sense. Jane was anything but *just*. She was infinite and extraordinary, grander than time and space and everything in between. Jane Ives was an inconceivable phenomenon he couldn't fully wrap his head around. She was not *just*. "But... you."

With only inches between them Mike once again found his eyes casting down towards her lips. It felt like weeks ago that they were sat on Lizzie's back patio kissing while the whole neighborhood slept, unaware of the madness that had just taken place only hours before. Jane's eyes looked back and forth between his own, her cheeks suddenly turning pink. Mike had a feeling she could tell exactly what he was thinking about doing. Though she didn't look away or move, which he took as a good sign.

Mike closed the distance between them, his hand resting on her cheek while the other stayed on the ground to prop himself up. He could feel the residue of chapstick on her lips which she had put on when she first got in the car. Moments after he kissed her he felt her hands land on the back of his neck, her fingers linking with one another so her grip wouldn't slip. Kissing Jane was probably the most amazing and unique feeling in the whole world. His whole body had gone numb, yet he could feel every atom of his existence going into overdrive at the same time. His brain felt like jelly, unable of any and all thought for what may have been forever, yet he was simultaneously aware of every movement she made.

Her fingertips rested at his hairline on the bottom of his neck, slowly inching upwards. Kissing Jane was slow, as if they had all the time in the world. Sitting at the quarry, with no other sign of human life in sight, made it feel as if they *did* have all the time in the world. It was Friday evening, the sun not quite ready to set yet not nearly as high in the sky as it had been when they left school.

Everything he had previously thought was gross about kissing was disproven. Mike had always hated the feeling of someone else's breath, and despised the idea of the sensation while trying to kiss someone. But Jane's breath, lightly brushing his lips and chin, was somehow better. She was so impossibly perfect, at least to him, that he sometimes wondered if she was real. Feeling her breathing was a reminder that she was a living, breathing person just like him. Breathing was such a simple thing, but nothing about Jane was simple.

When the two finally pulled away from one another the sky had started to turn a light shade of orange and the sun had set enough that it had disappeared behind the trees. They stood up and started heading back towards Mike's car. They walked in a comfortable silence, Jane holding onto his hand and standing closely to him. Once they reached his car Jane got into the seat next to him. Before he could turn the keys in the ignition she looked over at him. "I don't want to go home yet." She said simply.

Mike turned towards her, raising his eyebrows at her. "Well, we could go to my house?" He suggested. Every place outside was too getting too dark, and they'd just eaten. "My dad's home, but he'll leave us

alone.

Jane's face spread into a smile. "That sounds good." She said.

He started the car and started driving towards his house, the thought of Jane coming with him making his heart start to race. She was going to be in his house, probably in his room. Mike was thankful he'd been making an effort to keep his room clean for the past month.

19. Chapter 19: Jane

you guys: *expecting a fluffy update just like last time, with nothing but pure mileven moments, and absolutely zero interference with their happiness*

me: lol nah fam

Max and Lizzie stood next to Jane as she took out the books she needed for her first two classes, listening eagerly as she recapped the time she spent with Mike the night before. Her cheeks felt warm yet she continued with the story. She was so overcome with joy that she not only had a boyfriend, but she had two good friends she could talk about him with. All within her first month in Hawkins. If she'd been told everything that would happen over the past couple weeks when she first arrived in town she wouldn't have believed it for a second.

"You went to his *house*?" Lizzie interrupted, a cheeky grin spreading on her face

"Yeah." Jane told her, "But nothing happened." She then added, having a feeling she knew where the conversation was going

Max's expression matched the girl standing next to her, "Did you go in his room?"

Jane rolled her eyes. "Yes, but nothing happened."

"Did you guys, like, do anything?"

She laughed, shaking her head. "What did I just say? *Nothing happened.*"

Her two friends looked at each other, their faces falling slightly, before they looked back at Jane. "That's disappointing." Max said

"Yeah, well, I'll keep you guys in mind next time we're alone together." She said sarcastically, making both of her friends laugh

The normalcy of talking with her friends and not having to worry about what was going on at home was something she was beginning to get used to, and was a feeling she never wanted to be without. She felt, for the most part, like a normal girl. As long as her dad was still locked up, which he was to her knowledge, she felt light as air without the burden dragging her down. Jane had *friends*. She had a *boyfriend*. Both of which were fully aware of her family situation and hadn't turned their backs on her. It seemed impossible for her to be anything but overjoyed.

That is until the voice of Troy Harrington, loud enough to carry over to where she stood, pierced her momentary tranquility.

"You know, it makes sense that the three dykes would be friends."

All three girls looked over to find him standing on the other side of the hallway, only ten feet away. Though he was talking to the friend standing next to him they all knew that his words were for them to hear. Part of the reason the three of them got along so well was because they were different from the rest of the female student body. Jane only had three skirts in her closet, and she had a feeling her friends had just as many if not less than her. Despite the fact that he was right his words hurt none the less.

"Just ignore them." Max said to them, her tone sounding just as ticked off as Jane felt. "They're idiots who don't know their asses from their elbows."

She and Lizzie smiled at her comment, but their expressions were quickly wiped away by Troy's friends response. "Which one do you think is the freakiest?"

"I think it's the redhead." Troy responded, "She's probably into kinky angry sex."

Jane felt her stomach tightening into a knot, sneaking a glance at Max. The usual blank and stoic face she wore had morphed into a grimace. Her back was to Troy, likely to keep him from seeing just how much his words bothered her. She had always had such a stone cold exterior, unless she was joking around with Jane and Lizzie. It didn't come as a surprise that she didn't want anyone to see her

looking weak in any sort of way.

"I don't know, I always heard blondes have more fun."

She saw Lizzie roll her eyes, then look over at Max. It was as if Troy's words about her rolled off her back and she was more concerned about what he had said about her friend. It was characteristically kind of her and, yet again, didn't come as a surprise.

Out of the corner of her eye Jane watched Troy make a face, pretending to be deep in thought. Of course she knew that she was next, it was just what he was going to say that would be a surprise. "You know, I think it's the new girl." He said after a moment. *Shocker*. "She's got all those daddy issues. She's probably into really weird stuff."

Jane's stomach plummeted to the floor, all the way down to the school's basement, faster than the speed of light. How the *hell* had someone outside of her friends found out about her dad? She silently prayed to whoever or whatever may have been listening that he was just talking out of his ass and didn't know what he was saying was true. Though she had a feeling she wasn't so lucky. If he was just making things up what were the odds he would actually end up saying something that was true?

She felt her friends look over at her, then heard Max mutter under her breath "I'm gonna kill him."

"*Don't*." Jane said immediately. The last thing she needed was for his statement to gauge a reaction, only confirming that he was right. "They're idiots, remember?"

Just as she finished taking her books out and grabbed the door of her locker to shut it Troy's voice once again traveled over to their side of the hallway. "Hard to believe that Frogface Wheeler landed someone like that. I was starting to get worried for him, you know. I was thinking that he was just as queer as his friend Byers."

Jane felt as if someone had poured lava directly into her stomach. Her vision started to blur, her mind unable to focus on anything other than the fact that someone was speaking so negatively about

Mike. Lizzie had told her some of the extent of his experience being bullied, but she'd never seen or heard it for herself much. Slamming her locker shut she held her books out to Max, muttering a quick "hold these" before she turned and pushed her way through the people trying to get to class until she stood in front of Troy. She was only partially aware of her fiends who quickly followed her, their protests not quite reaching her.

Noticing her walking over Troy's face spread into a wide, shit eating grin. "Speak of the devil." He said, glancing at his friend before looking back at her. "Hello Jane."

"You need to *shut up*." She spat. Jane's whole body had become numb she was so angry. She wouldn't have been surprised if she was shaking, she just couldn't feel it to know for sure

He wore an expression of mock sympathy, one she wished she would smack right off. "What, did I say something that hurt your feelings?"

Jane stepped towards him, fully aware of the more than six in height difference between them. She had always been small, and had never really minded. Just for once she wished she could look a little bit more intimidating. "Keep Mike's name *out* of your *mouth*."

"Or what?" He shot back. "What are you going to do? Because you're so big, bad and scary. You're just as pathetic as Wheeler, you two deserve each other."

If she weren't so angry Jane might have cried. His words hit her hard, right in the softest part of her heart. She'd spent so much of her life pathetic and pitiful, and she was sick and tired of it. People like her dad, Troy, and all the other bullies just like them she had encountered at her old school had put her down for long enough. But the last straw was hearing the people who had picked her up from rock bottom being treated the way she had for so long. Jane was fully capable of letting people's words bounce off her. But those words being directed at her friends, or at Mike, was when she lost it.

A loud *crack* silenced the hallway as Jane's fist connected with Troy's nose. If she weren't so angry her knuckles would have likely been on fire, and she had a feeling she would feel the pain in an hour or so.

But the look on Troy's face, and the shock that hung in the air, made every moment of discomfort she would soon feel entirely worth it. Plus she doubted she would be in as much pain as he would. His hand went up to his nose, checking for blood. Jane couldn't help but be disappointed that none had come out.

"You little bitch." He spat at her, "Did you just fucking punch me?"

"Next time I hear you talking about him I break it." She said, as threateningly as she could

Troy and his friend hurried down the hall, squeezing past the group of students that had gathered around to watch. There wasn't a doubt in Jane's mind that the word of what she'd done would spread like wildfire, even possibly to some teachers. But the possibility of getting in trouble didn't bother her nearly as much as what she had just heard. She turned back towards her friends who looked the most surprised out of everyone in the hallway.

Handing her books back to her Max shook her head a few times. "That was... *awesome*."

"I can't believe you *punched* him." Lizzie chimed in

Jane shrugged, though she was admittedly a bit proud of herself too. Standing up to someone so notorious did feel good. "Didn't you just hit him with a textbook like a week ago?"

"Yeah but that's different." She said, "Plus I hit his arm, not his *face*."

By now the crowd around them had started to thin out. But with one glance at the clock she knew it had everything to do with the bell ringing in less than two minutes. "Come on, we have to go to class." Jane said, starting in the direction of her history class with her two friends following her, still clearly impressed at what they had just seen her do.

xXx

"Incoming."

Jane looked up from her lunch to look at Max, then followed her eyes

across the cafeteria. She spotted Mike heading straight towards her while his three friends started for their usual table. By the look on his face she didn't need three guesses to figure out he'd heard about the incident just two hours before. Unable to tell if he was upset or not she glanced nervously at Max.

"What do I do?

Max shrugged her shoulders, "I don't know." She said, "He's *your* boyfriend."

She looked back up at Mike, who was only a few feet away. He took the chair next to Jane, dropping his bag down on the floor. Jane's heart started pounding as she waited for his reaction.

"Did you punched Troy in the face?" He asked her. She studied his expression, trying to read him as best she could

"Yes?" She said, the word coming out more like a question. Suddenly she wasn't as proud about her actions as she had been. The whole reason she even stood up to Troy was because of Mike, but what if he didn't want her to?

His look softened slightly, but she still couldn't read it. "Jane, why would you do that?" He asked her, "You could have gotten into serious trouble."

"Because he was saying awful things about you!" She said. Obviously Mike had only heard a part of the story and was in the dark about what had bothered her the most. "Plus Lizzie and Max."

"Not to mention what he said about you." Max said, her eyes cast down at her food. As if by not looking at them she wasn't listening into the conversation.

Mike looked between them, his eyebrows coming together. Though he looked adorable she hated when he worried about her. "What did he say about you?"

Jane shook her head, "Nothing." She said quickly. What Troy said about her wasn't what she wanted to focus on, for as long as possible.

"He knows about her dad." Max chimed in, yet again

"*What?*"

She glared at her friend, who looked down to avoid Jane's icy stare. Looking back at Mike she put a hand on his arm and started to stand up. "Let's go talk about this outside."

He followed her on her way out of the cafeteria, keeping close behind her. Jane tried to ignore the looks of those around them, who had likely heard about what she had done to Troy. She wondered how long the incident would hang over her head as most people's first impression of her. Max and Lizzie had told her that it wasn't just Mike and his friends, but that hardly anyone had ever stood up to Troy. She imagined that no one expected the new girl to be the one to do it. How long would it be before Jane wasn't just 'The New Girl Who Punched Troy'?

Once they were in the hallway, a few feet away from the doors of the cafeteria, they both leaned against the wall and faced each other. If they weren't in the middle of a very serious conversation Jane might have taken advantage of the fact that there was no one else around.

"He knows about your dad?" Mike asked, the worry in his face clear as day. She grabbed his hand and linked her fingers with his, desperate to provide some sort of comfort for him as he had for her not so long ago.

"Maybe." She said, "I don't know for sure if he does. He could have thought he was making things up that just happened to be true."

A look of confusion crossed over his face, which she couldn't blame him for. She was being purposely vague. "What did he say?"

Jane hesitated, not thrilled about the idea of repeating what Troy had said back to Mike. Not just because the vulgarity of his words was embarrassing but she knew they would only worry him more. "Well, he was taking about all three of us, saying really nasty and inappropriate things." She started, now unable to look directly at him. "And he said..." Jane's voice trailed off, as if the words didn't want to come out of her mouth. "Mike, please, don't make me say it."

He squeezed her hand lightly. "Jane, this is important." He told her

She knew he was right, but that didn't make it easier. Jane leaned her head back on the wall, her eyes fixed anywhere else but Mike's face. She let out a long sigh, "He said I had daddy issues."

"That's awful."

"Yeah." Jane forced herself to look at him again, finding that he looked just as worried as she expected. "You see what I mean, it's not total confirmation that he knows. He could have just been trying to say something shocking. I haven't been here long enough for anyone to really know anything about me."

But Mike didn't look convinced. "I don't know, all of the things he could have mentioned and he talks about you dad? It's just too much of a coincidence." He looked down at her hand in his, Mike's eyebrows coming together as he saw the red mark on one of her knuckles. "Does this hurt?"

"A little." She admitted. "I bet Troy's nose looks worse, though."

He smiled at her. "He does. I saw him on my way here."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it's all bruised." Mike said. The fact that she had left a bruise on his stupid face made Jane smile. It was enough to make her almost entirely forget about the fact that he might have known about her dad. "You know, I'm worried about you getting in trouble and everything, but... it was really badass."

Jane's smile only grew. "Maybe just a little."

"Or a lot."

She felt her stomach doing backflips, as if there were trapeze artists in a circus doing a complex routine inside her. Jane made no attempt to hide the wide smile she wore. Every once in awhile she would take a step back and see how quickly she was falling for Mike, and how strongly. While it was now obvious that they shared feelings for each other Jane seriously doubted he was in as deep as she was. Which she

didn't particularly mind. He liked her, and she planned on taking what she could get. Jane would be content with him not sharing the extent of her feelings. The fact that he had any feelings for her at all was a miracle.

She put her other hand on the back of his neck, then stood on her toes and pressed her lips against his. Though she couldn't kiss him for nearly as long as she would have liked she, once again, would take what she could get. Mike wrapped his arms around her waist, his hand resting on her lower back. Despite the fact that the kiss only lasted for a moment or two neither of them were quite ready to pull away.

"We should go back inside." Mike said, his voice quiet and his forehead pressed against hers.

"You're right."

Still neither of them moved an inch.

"Our friends are probably waiting for us."

"Definitely."

Mike sighed quietly before finally pulling away from her, though he kept his arm around her waist. They started towards the cafeteria once again, making no effort to break contact as they stepped through the doors. Halfway towards the back of the room Jane spotted the table she sat at with Max totally empty. A small frown formed on her face as she searched for her friend. Moments later she spotted a familiar head of red hair sitting at a table with Mike's three friends, in the chair he usually occupied. Jane glanced up at Mike, seeing that he seemed to notice as well.

"That's... interesting." He said as they got closer to the table.

The nearer they got the easier it was to see Max talking excitedly to all three boys. By the looks on their faces Jane could easily guess what she was telling them. "Yeah, interesting."

Once they were only a few feet away they each grabbed a chair from nearby and took a seat next to one another at the head of the table.

They had hardly lowered themselves into their seats when Mike's friend, Dustin, looked over at Jane with wide eyes. "You *punched* Troy?" He asked, clearly not quite able to believe it

"I literally told you an hour ago." Mike said, rolling his eyes

"You said 'hit'." Lucas clarified, "We all thought you meant she slapped him. A slap is way different than a punch."

Jane looked down at the lunch trays in front of Max, which she had brought over with her. She slid her lunch towards her and picked up the fry she had been eating when Mike walked in. "It's not that big of a deal." She said, once again trying to play the whole thing off

Will, who sat on the opposite side of Max, leaned forward so he could see her. "It's absolutely a big deal." He told her. "No one's ever stood up to him like that before. Not even the people who have known him since elementary school, let alone someone who's been in Hawkins for three weeks."

"I heard he was bleeding so much he had to change into his gym shirt." Dustin said, looking at Jane for confirmation

She laughed, "That is *not* true." She assured him, "It didn't even bleed at all."

"Did he cry?" Lucas asked, his eyebrows high on his forehead

Jane shook her head, her grin only growing. "Oh my god, no!" She said. Max, the only one at the table who had seen the confrontation, seemed just as amused as Jane felt. "Who told you that?"

Lucas shrugged, "No one. I was just hoping he did."

Noticing that Mike didn't have any lunch yet, which made sense since he'd come straight to talk to her instead of grabbing food, she slid her tray over so it was between the two of them. He smiled at her before taking a fry off of her plate. "Maybe he cried in the bathroom afterwards." He suggested

She bumped her shoulder against his, "Probably not." Jane insisted. They were all being so dramatic, yet she couldn't hold back a smile. "I

didn't hurt him *that* bad."

"The true wound was to his ego." Mike said, then took a bite of the food he had just stolen off of her plate

"Mike's been talking about you for two weeks nonstop." Will told her, causing her cheeks to flare up. "He never told us how kickass you are."

Jane looked over at her boyfriend (holy *crap* he was her boyfriend), raising an eyebrow at him. "Really?"

He sent a halfhearted glare towards Will. "I wouldn't say nonstop."

"I would." Dustin muttered under his breath, just loud enough for everyone to hear.

The grin she wore grew twice its size. While she'd known Mike had talked to one of his friends about her at least once from when Will told her about his feelings towards her, hearing that he talked about her *nonstop* to *all* of his friends was totally different. If they weren't sitting in the middle of the cafeteria, surrounded by their friends, she would have kissed him again.

Mike held his hands up, "In my defense," he told them, "She's never done anything so kickass before."

"Well I bet no one in the school is going to dare to mess with you again." Will said, everyone nodding in agreement.

Jane picked up another fry, dipping it in ketchup before popping it in her mouth. "I didn't do it because he was messing with me." She told them, since they seemed to be missing the entire point of the punch in the first place. "I did it because he was messing with people I care about. He can say whatever he wants about me and I can take it just fine. But he crossed the line with what he said about you guys and Lizzie." She pointed a finger back and forth between Max and Mike

"Regardless," Dustin said, "Anyone who has the guts to stand up to Troy like that is a friend of ours." He extended his hand towards her across the table. "Welcome to the party."

Though it was probably the dorkiest thing she'd ever heard in her life Jane was beaming. Having Max and Lizzie as friends and Mike as a boyfriend already felt like more than she could have asked for. A small part of her felt guilty for accepting three new friends because she was already so blessed. But the way they had looked at her as she told them about what she'd done to Troy seemed like they thought she was the coolest thing since the newest Star Wars movie. Not to mention how Mike looked at his friends, then back at her. She could almost feel the disbelief that his friends and his girlfriend were getting along so famously.

Jane grabbed Dustin's hand, shaking it quickly before he moved to shake Max's. Despite how she rolled her eyes, because she was just way too cool for their nerdiness, she took his hand. Her friends eventually moved onto other topics but her focus stayed on the fact that she now had a group. Not just two friends and a guy she hung out with one on one. A *group*. One that just so happened to include her boyfriend.

She frequently looked over at Mike, sitting so close to her so effortlessly. They'd been dating, officially, for 18 hours. Jane had lived life as Mike Wheeler's Girlfriend for an entire 18 hours. Soon it would be 24, then 48, then a whole week. She felt as if she should make a name tag, officially labeling her as Mike Wheeler's Girlfriend, and wearing it everywhere she went. There was not a person on earth who shouldn't be fully aware of the fact that not only did she have such strong feelings for him, but that he felt the same way.

She had been Mike Wheeler's girlfriend for 18 hours, and she intended to continue that way for as long as she could.

20. Chapter 20: Mike

okay, okay, *now* it's time for pure mileven fluff after putting them through the ringer. hope you enjoy!

Saturday afternoon, four days after the incident between Jane and Troy, Mike pulled up in front of her house. With the school week over the possibility of Jane getting in trouble seemed to have been entirely avoided. Mike had a feeling Troy hadn't dared to tell a teacher about what happened and risk getting in trouble for what he had been saying to get her upset in the first place. Either way he was just thankful she didn't receive any sort of consequences other than now being a hot topic for every student in Hawkins.

He walked up to her front porch, ringing the doorbell and putting his hands in his pockets while he waited for Jane to answer. They were meeting up with their friends, who now all sat together at lunch in what may have been the weirdest group in the school, at a restaurant in the next town over that Max suggested. Though Mike wouldn't have initially thought they would all have gotten along so well he was pleasantly surprised. Jane and Max has easily transitioned into his already stablished friend group despite the fact that neither of them were scifi nerds, which had ones been a necessity. While Max occasionally made fun of their conversations about Star Wars Jane listened with open ears, intrigued despite having never seen the movie before. Though he intended to change that.

Jane and Max were different enough from each other without adding the four boys into the mix. Max was famously tough and had a cold exterior. They had quickly learned she didn't mean it when she pretended she wanted nothing to do with them because they were such nerds. He would every once in awhile catch the act she put up all the time slowly fade away when they were deep in conversation. Mike never dared to mention it, however, knowing he would likely never see her that way again.

On the other hand Jane was more soft and gentle, when she wasn't punching Troy Harrington that is. Watching the two girls interact was interesting to say the least. Their personalities rubbed off on each

other, which was common for friends. Jane was quick witted with comebacks when she talked to Max, and Max seemed just the slightest bit more calm when they sat down at the lunch table. As if the addition to the two girls wasn't enough of the shock to the rest of the group Max had also suggested they invite Lizzie to lunch, an idea no one was opposed to.

Mike wondered if anyone else at school viewed the new group was just as strangely as he did. But despite how unexpected the combination was he, in no way, minded it. Part of dating someone was getting to know the people they hung out with. It certainly helped that he already knew one of her friends fairly well.

The door opened moments after he rang the bell, revealing Jane's mother. She smiled at him and stepped out of the way so he could come inside. "She'll be ready in a second, why don't you come in?"

"Thank you." He said, walking past her and watching her shut the door behind her.

After everything Jane had told him about her parents, mostly about her mom, it was somewhat hard to believe that he'd never actually spoken to her before. Mike tried his best to not stare at the cut on her lip or the bruise just underneath that, knowing exactly how she had gotten it and who gave it to her. To think the moment of injury had happened just hours, maybe even less, before he came to the house was jarring.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Mike." She said, holding her hand out for him to shake. "Jane has told me so much about you."

From up the stairs, only a few feet away, he could hear Jane's voice from inside her bedroom. "Mama don't *tell* him that!"

He grinned, imagining the embarrassed look on her face he knew she was wearing as he shook her hand. "It's nice to meet you too Mrs. Ives."

"Terry is fine." She told him. Just like Jane, Mike marveled at how kind her mother was despite what had happened to her. It would have been so easy to turn bitter and miserable after what she had

endured. Yet she had the same kindness written across every inch of her face that Jane did. How Jane had ended up the way she did despite her father was no longer a mystery. Not only did she look strikingly similar to her mother but she had inherited her good heart. "She'll be down in a minute, she's been getting ready forever so I'm sure she'll be done soon."

"*Mama!*" Jane called again, her voice sounding closer and more annoyed. Though her mother seemed nothing but amused. "Can't he just come up here?"

Her mother's eyes glanced towards him and, for a moment, Mike felt as if he could easily have melted into a puddle of embarrassment. Before she could respond Jane called back down the stairs "I'll be done in *literally* two seconds."

She looked at him once again, this time smiling. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do." Her mother called back before flashing him one last grin and walking down the hall.

Mike headed towards the stairs, thinking how much of an easier route they were to Jane's room compared to climbing onto the roof of the garage. He wondered if her mom knew that he had been one of her friends who had snuck her out of her room. But as quickly as the thought came to him he knew the answer. There was no doubt in his mind Jane and her mom had talked about everything that happened, on both their parts. The fact that her now-boyfriend was there to sneak her out was a pretty big detail to leave out just for the sake of saving herself the embarrassment.

Once he got up the stairs he pushed her bedroom door open, which was already ajar. Two steps into her room he immediately noticed something different. Her hair was tied up, which wasn't super rare in and of itself. But it looked straighter. The usual curls that popped out of the hair tie were now merely waves. Not only that but instead of the jeans she wore, typically light wash with the hems rolled up, she now had on a skirt with the same denim material. While the shirt she wore was a plain black tee, that he had seen on her once before, it seemed so different paired with everything else about her.

Jane looked up from tying the laces on her sneakers, a smile

spreading across her face when she saw him walking in. "Hey."

"Hey." He said, walking over and sitting on the corner of her bed closest to her. "You look... different."

Her face fell slightly, the corners of her lips turning down. "You don't like it?"

"No, no I do." He said quickly, though she only looked a little convinced. "You look great, it's just very different from how you usually look."

She shrugged, going back to tying her shoes. "I just wanted to try something different."

Though Mike wasn't sure how much he believed her. He could understand wanting to change things up a bit, but it was such a drastic change from how she usually dressed. Not only that but he was pretty sure she was wearing mascara, and he had never once seen her with make up on. He briefly debated asking her what had prompted her decision to try something different but ultimately decided against it once he realized the possibility his question could be taken the wrong way.

Jane stood up once both her shoes were tied, then came over and sat on her bed next to him. "Sorry about my mom." She said, taking his hand in hers. "She wasn't supposed to tell you that."

He shrugged, squeezing her hand lightly. "It's okay." Mike said, "My friends told you about how I talk about you a lot, it's nice to hear you do it to."

She grinned at him, her smile now fully returning. "Of course I do." She said, bumping her shoulder against his. "Max probably thinks I'm so annoying. I'm surprised she hasn't told me to shut up yet."

Mike smiled at the thought of Jane talking about him just as much as he did about her. Though he had a feeling he talked about her way more. "Yeah, well, now she sits with us and sees that I'm even worse than you are."

She smiled even wider, placing a quick kiss on his lips before

standing up and getting her jacket. "You ready?"

"Yeah." He said, getting up and following her outside of her room and down the stairs.

Before walking out the door she went over to her mom, leaning over the back of the couch she sat on and gave her a quick hug. She bid her a short goodbye then went back over and headed outside. Once the door was closed behind them she grabbed his hand once again, standing close to him on their way to his car. Just as she had almost every time she sat in the passengers seat she put the radio on but kept the volume down so they could talk.

"I have a question." She said, turning in the seat so she could face him. "Has your friend Lucas ever said anything about Max?"

Mike's eyebrows pulled together, not understanding where her curiosity with Lucas had come from. "Um, sort of." He told her. "Just saying the same stuff Dustin and Will have."

"Like?"

He shrugged, "Like how it's cool you guys are sitting with us now. Nothing really significant. Why?"

She hesitated for a moment, biting on her bottom lip. "Promise you won't tell anyone I told you this, *especially* Max."

"I promise."

Her lips twitched up slightly, "I think Max might have a crush on Lucas."

Mike's jaw dropped open. If he didn't have to focus on driving he would have starred at her, trying to find some kind of sign that she was joking. "Seriously?" He asked her, "What did she say."

"Okay well she never really *said* anything." Jane quickly clarified, "But she talks about him a lot considering they've never really had a conversation until a few days ago. I just have a feeling."

The two talked about the possibility of Max liking Lucas, and vice

versa, for the rest of the fifteen minute ride. Jane told him that she 'just had a feeling', similarly to how Max knew about her crush on Mike. Though Mike tried not to he couldn't help but notice how they both were talking about their feelings for one another so easily. They always sat next to each other at lunch, their chairs as close together as they could get. Jane even joined in on their conversations in homeroom. She was so openly affectionate towards him when they were in school, as if she didn't care one bit who saw, and he now was able to do the same without worrying who might have been silently judging them. Not to mention how easily they talked about their relationship to one another and others, seemingly no longer embarrassed.

When they walked into the dinner, a bigger and nicer version of one in Hawkins, they immediately spotted the table where all their friends were already sitting. Technically a booth with another table connected, giving them enough room for everyone to sit. Jane and Mike exchanged a glance at the sight of Max sitting next to Lucas as they walked over. They grabbed the two open chairs across from the other not-quite couple.

Max raised her eyebrow at Jane, looking over her quickly. "Don't you look nice."

Despite the monotone voice she used Jane smiled at her. "Thank you." She replied. Though Mike knew she was only ignoring Max's tone

"Troy's words really got to you, huh?"

He instantly looked at Jane, who was glaring at her red haired friend across the table. "What?" He asked her. Everything she had repeated to him from the encounter had nothing to do with her appearance, leaving him hopelessly confused

Lizzie, who sat two seats down from Max, leaned forward and rested her arms on the table. "You didn't tell him?"

"No." She said. Mike noticed her cheeks starting to turn pink. "It doesn't matter."

"Clearly it does." Max muttered under her breath.

He put his hand on her arm, bringing her attention back to him. "What did he say?"

She stared back at him for a moment, as if trying to decide whether or not to tell him. After a few seconds passed she looked away. "It's nothing, really. I don't care about what he said."

"Is that why you look like Connie Sellecca?" Max asked with heavy sarcasm. When Jane only glared at her once more in response she rolled her eyes and looked over at Mike. "He called us dykes."

Though no one seemed surprised that Troy would say something along those lines the four boys all did a combination of groaning, eye rolling, and head shaking. He looked back at Jane, who was suddenly very interested in the paper placemat in front of her. "Why didn't you tell me about that?" He asked her, though he had an inkling he already knew. If his comment truly hadn't bothered her she likely would have mentioned it at some point. But the fact that she had suddenly changed her look so much was a dead giveaway that it had struck a nerve with her.

She sighed, looking up and over at him. "I just don't want to talk about this." She said. "I'll tell you later, okay? But I really don't want to talk about Troy right now."

The conversation quickly shifted, thanks to Dustin, to a new movie that had recently come out. It seemed that everyone at the table wanted to go see it, except for Max who remained as indifferent to the topic as she could despite the fact Mike could tell she was interested as well. Will suggested that they go see the movie once they finished eating, which everyone quickly agreed to. Once their food came they each took turns telling one another what they had heard about the movie and making predictions about the ending based off of what they had heard.

Even as the topic was long behind them Mike's mind was stuck on what Troy's words. He couldn't help but wonder if there was anything else about the altercation she hadn't told him about for whatever reason. Though he could imagine why she hadn't told him, and

guessed that it had nothing to do with him, he wished she would have felt comfortable enough. Mike made a mental note to ask either Max or Lizzie if there was anything else Jane was holding back.

Once they finished eating and paid the check they each went outside and split up into three cars; Max's, Lucas', and Mike's. A few comments got tossed towards him and Jane, mostly consisting of "we'll let you two drive together" or "get it out of your system before we get to the theater", leaving them sitting alone in his car while the others packed into the remaining two vehicles. Mike did his best to ignore the blush that rose to his cheeks.

Try as he might to let the topic of Troy go he just couldn't. As all the others started up their cars he looked over at Jane. "Why didn't you tell me?" He asked her

Her face had confusion written all over it before it was quickly replaced by slight annoyance when she realized what he meant. "Do we have to talk about this?" She asked, leaning the back of her head against the seat

"No." He said, "I just want to know."

"I don't want to talk about it." She said simply

Instead of replying Mike turned the key and pulled out of the parking lot of the diner, farther behind their friends than he intended to be. The two of them rode in silence for nearly half of the drive to the theater, which was just about twenty minutes away from the diner. The only sound was whatever song was playing on the radio, the volume still turned down from their ride there.

Just as they crossed back into Hawkins Mike felt Jane looking at him but pretended to be oblivious. He felt guilty for pressing the topic so much, especially since it clearly bothered her. Things would have been so much easier if he could read her thoughts. If he could have read her mind he would have known exactly what Troy said the day it happened and the whole conversation could have been avoided. Not only that but he would know exactly when to stop pushing her to talk about something.

"He's right." Jane said suddenly, likely just a hint of whatever train of thought was running through her head.

Mike could only spare a quick look at her, one not nearly long enough to read her expression. "Who Troy?" Out of the corner of his eye he saw her nod. "He's never right about anything."

"He was right about my dad." She pointed out. "And he's right about me."

He had no clue what direction she was going, again wishing he could read her mind. "How could he possibly say anything right about you?"

Jane hesitated long enough for them to pass four storefronts. "I'm... not like the other girls. I don't look like them."

"So?"

"I'm not normal like them."

Mike spotted the theater down at the end of the road. He wished they were farther so he would have more time to figure out exactly what she was saying. His foot eased on the glass, buying them a handful of extra seconds by the slower speed. "Every single person we just are lunch with isn't 'normal'." He paused for one beat, "Do you want to be normal?"

"... no."

He pulled into the parking lot of the theater and picked a spot close to the two other cars his friends had taken, both of which were empty. Turning the car off he looked over at Jane, who was staring forward and biting on her bottom lip. "You shouldn't let someone like Troy have any influence over what you think of yourself. He's a piece of garbage, and you're probably the most awesome person on earth."

Jane finally met his eyes, for the first time since they got back in the car. "That's a little dramatic." She said despite the small smile on her face

"Well, I mean it." He told her, which was entirely true. "And, honestly, who cares if you look like girls like Jennifer Hayes or Stacey Shapiro? They're airhead girls born into privilege. They're total princesses."

"But they're pretty."

Mike shrugged, "Yeah, they are." He admitted. "But so are you. Actually, you're prettier than them. And not just because you're a better person than they are, but because they look just like every other girl in Hawkins and you don't."

Her eyebrows climbed up on her forehead, her smile spreading ever so slightly. "You think I'm prettier than Stacey?" She asked, a hint of skepticism laced in her voice

"A thousand times prettier." He told her. "A thousand times prettier than Jennifer and Stacey *combined*."

Jane rolled her eyes at him. "Okay, that's *really* dramatic." She told him, but she smiled none the less.

Mike only shrugged once more. "It's still the truth."

She leaned across the space between them, her hand effortlessly slipping to the back of his neck as she kissed him. Despite how many times they had kissed already Mike was still, every time, shocked and amazed whenever the lips met. In one moment he could go from a fully functioning human being to a puddle of mush, incapable of even the simplest thoughts or actions. She, more specifically her lips, had such powerful control over him that he should have been frightened. But he welcomed it with open arms. In no way would he mind his world, filled with atrocious and gruesome things, void of anything besides Jane.

She was like another worldly, all powerful being, and he was willingly trapped in her grasp. There wasn't a single thing about her he didn't like. Even cherry, which he always thought was too overwhelming of a flavor, was suddenly his favorite when she wore it on her lips. As she pulled away from him, cheeks bright red, and told him they should go inside before their friends started wondering

where they were, he was struck with a mildly frightening thought. One that hung over his head as they got out of the car and walked the length of the parking lot, fingers intertwined.

The realization that he had fallen in love had snuck up on him like an expert predator finally striking its mindless pray. He had fallen victim to her as easily as if he handed her a weapon and lay at her feet. The intensity of his feelings had struck him like a bus. No, not strong enough. A train. Three trains. Three trains traveling a hundred miles an hour was what he had been struck with. Yet he felt no pain. Though he did feel as if, at any moment, he would float off the parking lot pavement and up into the clouds. It was her hand, wrapped around his, that kept him grounded. He was undoubtedly in love with Jane Ives. And when she looked at him, smiling as she reached over and wiped off the lipgloss that had transferred onto his lips, he was no longer afraid.

21. Chapter 21: Jane

I'm glad you guys liked the last chapter so much, especially the part about Troy getting a taste of his own medicine. I hope you enjoy yet another update!

Jane sat on her bed, starring at the phone on her nightstand. Her mom's words echoed in her head as she starred down at the paper in her hand. "It would be good for both of us to get out." While her mom, down the hall in her own bedroom, got changed out of her lounging-at-home clothes Jane found herself unable to dial the phone number in front of her. Though she no longer needed it written down, having memorized it already, she liked seeing the scrap sitting on her desk. A reminder that even if she wasn't with him there were remnants of Mike around her, such as his phone number written on a post-it. Yet as she starred both at the phone and the number she seemed unable to do anything with either of them.

"You're being stupid." She muttered to herself under her breath as she picked up the receiver. Jane dialed the number, waiting anxiously for someone to pick up. She wondered if his mother or Nancy would be the one to pick up, like before.

The line rang a few more times than it had in the past. "Hello?" A very obviously male voice said through the speaker, though it was in no way familiar.

"Hi, is Mike there?" She asked.

"Yes, hold on please." Moments later she heard the same voice, sounding distant, yell "Mike! Phone!" From what he had told her about his father Jane had a feeling she knew who she had just spoken to.

She counted up to seven before she heard anything from the other line. Finally, after some rustling from the phone being picked up, she heard a voice that was familiar through the phone. "Hello?"

"It's Jane." She said, then instantly cringed at herself. What the hell

kind of greeting was *it's Jane*? She shook her head, covering her eyes with her hand as if hiding from him despite the fact he was nowhere near her.

But he seemed unbothered. "Hey, what's up?"

"Nothing." *Lie*. "What are you doing?"

"Jus homework."

A frown formed on her face, her plan already taking a nosedive down the drain. There was no way she could take time away from him doing his homework both days of the weekend. The group had stayed out the night before late enough that they had hardly any time to get anything done until the next day. She was already starting to feel guilty that she'd even called him. "Oh, okay." She said, in the best nonchalant voice she could put on

"Why what's up?"

He knew her too well for her own good. Even without looking at her he could so effortlessly read her. "It's nothing."

"*Jane*." He said, his voice warning her not to keep up the lie

She sighed, leaning her head against the headboard behind her. "Okay, fine." She said. "I just... I really need to get out of the house. But if you're busy I can call Max."

"No, it's fine." He said immediately. "I'll be over soon."

Jane's face morphed into a smile at the thought of Mike so easily abandoning his homework just to spend time with her, knowing full well she would do the same. The feeling of guilt was somewhat overshadowed by the fact that he sounded so willing. There was not a hint of reluctance in his voice, nor hesitation. "Thank you."

"Is everything okay?" He asked. Did he have the ability to read her mind, and been keeping it a secret from her and everyone around them?

"I'll tell you when you get here."

Once she hung up the phone Jane threw a Members Only jacket over the sweater she was already wearing. The sun had fallen and she had been cold last night while they all went to the park, though that may have had something to do with the fact that she was wearing a skirt. After everything Mike said in the parking lot of the movie theater Jane had gone back to wearing jeans. As nice as she may have looked the day before the constant effort to keep her legs crossed was exhausting and completely overruled everything else.

Jane spotted her mom, still in her room, on her way towards the stairs. She leaned on the doorframe as her mom tied her hair up. "Mike is coming over in a little bit." She told her, "Where are you going?"

"To lunch with a friend from work." Her mom replied, looking at her through the reflection in the mirror she stood in front of. "Mike seems like a very nice young man."

Here we go she thought to herself. She had gotten away with avoiding the topic of Mike, for the most part, since she met him. In the back of her mind she knew she couldn't get away without it forever. "Yeah, he is."

Tightening her ponytail her mom turned to face her. "How are things going with you guys."

"They're going fine, Mama." She said, walking into her room fully. "He's going to be here soon so I'm going to wait for him outside."

Jane gave her mom a quick hug, placing a quick kiss on her cheek before heading towards the door again. "I want to hear more about him when you get back." Her mom said, "I have a right to know who my daughter's dating."

"Okay, promise." She called as she descended the stairs.

Jane sat on the stairs on her front porch as she waited for his car to appear, remembering the last time she sat in the same spot. It was strange how much their relationship had changed in such a short amount of time. She went from trying to hide every flaw about her and her life from him to being more honest than she had ever been

with anyone, besides her mother. Mike knew more than her friends upstate knew and even more than what Max and Lizzie knew, which was saying a lot since they knew a good deal. The two girls hardly brought up the topic of her father since they parted ways the morning after they snuck her out. But Mike, as gently as he could, pressed her to tell him more. She always let him, knowing his intentions were pure and that he was just worried about her. Jane had told him everything she was comfortable opening up about, and she was about to tell him even more.

She was on her feet before his car was fully parked. Once she was sitting next to him, and noticed the sweater he had on, she was suddenly disappointed in herself that she hadn't planned ahead and left her jacket up in her room. The opportunity to subtly hint that she was cold in hopes of him offering an extra layer, which she then took home and kept forever, had passed her by. Jane had half a mind to take her jacket off during the car ride and very conveniently leave in behind.

"Where do you want to go?" He asked her as she clicked her seatbelt

"Anywhere."

He pulled away from her house, seeming to already have a place in mind. A few blocks away he looked over at her. She could practically hear the question before he actually asked it. "What's up?"

She met his eyes, noticing that his hair was messier than usual. It only made him look even more cute, which was hard to believe was possible. "My dad posted bail." She said, "So he's out now."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Mike shook his head, "God, Jane." He said, "I'm so sorry."

She shrugged, trying to make it not seem like a big deal despite the fact that it really was. The last thing Mike needed to do was spend his time worrying about her. "It's fine. The order of protection is supposed to be finalized in the next few days, so we're just going to

spend a lot of time out of the house. My mom went out with a friend from work and I called you."

"I'm glad you did." He told her, causing a smile to spread on her face. "Do you want to come over tomorrow? We can do homework or whatever, just so you don't have to go home right away."

The thought of sitting in Mike's room, just as she had in hers, and doing homework made her stomach do a summersault. When she'd been to his house before she only stayed for about half an hour, and was too busy completely freaking out that she was at his house to actually enjoy being there. She wondered how long she would be able to stretch her stay, hoping it would be much longer than half an hour.

"That sounds great." She said

Jane looked out the window as he turned onto an unfamiliar street, having no clue where they were headed. Though she usually felt a need to be in the know about plans and destinations, yet she found herself unbothered by her cluelessness. Not only did she know next to nothing about what was in Hawkins and where, but Mike had lived there his whole life. He knew ten times better than her where the good places in town to hang out were. Needless to say she trusted his judgement more than her own in the situation. So she looked out the window, occasionally glancing over at him as if to just make sure he was still there, and enjoyed the view of houses which were all new to her.

A few minutes after they no longer passed houses but instead wooded area Mike parked the car in a spot similar yet different enough to know it wasn't the same spot he had parked when they went to the quarry. Jane got out of the car, walking close to his side as they entered the trees. Though every inch of land in view looked exactly the same as what they left behind Mike seemed to know exactly where he was going. She had no clue how long they'd been walking when the trees started to thin until they stood in a clearing, but the answer didn't matter. As far as she knew she didn't have a curfew that night.

When the trees stopped, making a clear boarder line, Jane found

herself standing in a clearing with a small body of water (the different names, such as rivers vs lakes, was something she had never excelled at) about 7 feet wide. Probably half a mile away was the view she'd had of the quarry, circular and less massive from ground level. If Jane squinted enough she could see the very spot she and Mike had sat at not so long ago.

"This is really nice." She said, looking away from the water so she could see him. He was a much better view. "I like it here."

Mike smiled, visibly glad she approved of the spot he'd chosen. "Good."

They walked close to the edge of the water, Mike this time beating her by grabbing her hand before she could do his. As they walked he told her about how his younger sister had her first dance lesson the night before and that his mom had cried. Jane was slightly envious that he had not one but two siblings. She was an only child, which she had a feeling was entirely her moms doing. In her mind she tried to picture what his little sister looked like. She imagined a midway point between Mike and Nancy, despite how bad and short lived her view of her had been, and turned back the clock. Jane then instantly hoped she would get to meet Holly one day.

"What's it like being an only child?" He asked her

She rolled her eyes, "Boring." Jane replied. "When you're really young and both your parents are too busy doing adult things to play with you you're just totally on your own. Then when you outgrow a baby sitter you're home alone every time your parents are at work, which isn't nearly as exciting as it seems."

Mike shrugged, "I don't know, it sounds pretty cool."

"That's what everyone who's *not* an only child says." She glanced down at the running water on the other side of him. The current was so slow and gentle she could almost describe it as cute. As if the water in the circular quarry was the mother and the river they stood by was the little kid. "How deep is that?"

He glanced down at the water for a moment or two, "I don't know,

maybe like five or six feet." Mike looked back over at her, "Why?"

A cheeky smile spread over her face. In one quick movement she put both her hands on his arm and pushed him towards the water, knowing full well he was standing close enough that he would fall in. She nearly collapsed into a fit of laughter when his head resurfaced after only a quick few moments of submersion. He rubbed the water out of his eyes, then pushed his hair backwards and off of his forehead. Despite having just been pushed he mirrored the smile on her face.

He reached the edge of the water, likely tall enough to have simply walked over and looked up at her. "Help me out." He said, reaching his hand up towards her

"Okay." She said, still giggling. "I'm sorry."

As soon as she wrapped her hand around his he, with one quick tug, pulled her into the water with him. She fell into the water, which was colder than she had anticipated, the shriek she let out quickly silenced. Before Jane could even try to resurface Mike pulled her up until her head was above water. She took a gulp of air, her eyes opening to find he was smiling even wider than he was when she was dry.

"I deserved that." She said, moving her hair away from her face. Though she knew the second it dried it would puff up twice in size she didn't care.

"Yeah." He agreed, "You did."

Jane wrapped her arms around his neck to keep herself afloat and simply because she wanted to. Mike quickly responded by wrapping his arms around her waist, keeping her close to him. They were tightly pressed against each other, both fooling themselves by using the current as their motives for holding onto one another. Though Jane felt her face go warm at the closeness she couldn't help but notice how perfectly they fit with one another. Like two puzzle pieces that were finally paired. Puzzle pieces that were also magnets. A puzzle that consisted of only two pieces that were also magnetic.

Mike kissed her, once again surprising her by being the first to initiate contact. Jane was so used to reaching for him first. She had never dwelled on it much, the extent of her thought being the simple assumption that she always beat him to it. For some strange reason, which she intended to investigate further, kissing was so much better when *Mike* kissed *her*. Instead of her expression of affection being reciprocated he was the one being affectionate. The world melted away until there was nothing but Mike and Jane, who was floating. She had experienced the feeling several other times when they kissed, but this time she was *literally* floating.

Jane could honestly say that her favorite feeling in the world was the feeling of being kissed by Mike. Despite being almost completely submerged in chilly water and the breeze that nipped the wet skin on her face she was perfectly warm. She was so hyperaware of everything that her brain was starting to short circuit. It would be a total mood killer if he had to take her to the hospital for brain failure, yet there was nothing she could do about it. There were no friends waiting for them nearby nor curfew hanging over their heads. If they wanted to they could have stayed in that spot as long as possible. She wanted to stay like this forever. Jane would have been mostly content if the world ended that very second because then she would have lived the last moment of her life kissing Mike Wheeler, which sounded like of a hell of a way to go.

Without any sense of time, due to her short circuited brain, she had no clue how long they stood (in her case floated) in the water lip locked. As much as she wanted to remain there for eternity they eventually had to pull away for the intake of air. At the sight of his now blue tinted lips Jane insisted they get out and dry off. He gave her a boost out of the water before she then lifted him up next to her. While they made their way back to his car, both of them half running from the cold air that had once seemed so warm, Jane was surprised with herself. She couldn't believe the lack of self consciousness that she felt at the fact that her wet clothes clung to her body. It may have had something to do with the fact that his did the same.

Once they reached the car Mike blasted the heat and they both ripped off their top layer, his sweatshirt landing onto of her jacket in the backseat. Jane kept her eyes fixed forward, knowing that if she

dared to look at him she would have ended up starring. While he pulled back onto the road she wished she had worn a tank top under her sweatshirt so she could discard another sopping wet article that was only making her more cold.

After the heat kicked in and she was no longer shivering she pulled down the sun visor and flipped the mirror open. A frown formed on her face at the sight of her unruly hair, which hadn't even fully dried yet. She instinctively looked down at her wrist for a hair tie, remembering the one she'd been using had broke only when she found none present. Jane tried her best to smooth down her hair but had a feeling it didn't do much.

"Do you want to go back to my house and change into something dry?" He asked her once she had given up

"Yeah that sounds good."

They arrived at his house only minutes later. She followed him inside, doing a quick survey of her surroundings. Jane wanted to absorb everything she could about the house he lived in. But she wasn't given nearly enough time since Mike instantly headed for the stairs the second he spotted his father asleep in the living room. She followed him up, her jacket hanging over her arm. On her way up she had to make a conscious effort to not look back to see if she was leaving any water behind, knowing she would be guilt ridden if she in any way damaged Mike's house.

His room was so *Mike*. And she loved it. She stared at the posters hung on the wall and whatever knick knacks laid around as he tossed his sweater into a hamper nearby. The most important item she spotted in the room was the phone next to his bed. The very same phone he had spoken to her through multiple times. While she struggled the put words together the day she had found out about his feelings for her that was the phone he listened to her with. It was just a phone, yet it was so much more. Jane felt silly for dwelling on it so much and turned her attention back to Mike as he went through his dresser.

He pulled out a pair of grey sweatpants and a navy sweatshirt, handing them to her and then pointing out the bathroom down the

hall. She closed the door behind her, making a face at her unruly hair in the mirror before turning her back on it. As she peeled her clothes off she tried not to focus on the fact that Mike was only fifteen steps away from her while she wasn't wearing a shirt (also attempting to ignore the fact that she had counted the steps on her way to the bathroom). She hung her clothes on the shower curtain rack, unsure of where else to put them.

Jane pulled on the sweats he gave her, the length of the pants just another reminder of how much taller he was than her. Once she pulled the sweatshirt over her head she looked at herself in the mirror again, keeping her hair tucked under the collar. She smiled, despite the sight of her crazy curls. These clothes had once been on Mike's body, and were now on hers. It was a closeness different from when they kissed in the lake. He had likely worn both articles long before he had met her. She knew she had owned the clothes she had just taken off before they moved to Hawkins. While she couldn't quite describe the exact feeling she got standing in his bathroom and wearing his clothes she certainly felt it.

She walked back down the hall towards his room, now barefoot since she ditched her still wet shoes and socks in the bathroom. Since his door was open she assumed he was fully clothed and it was safe for her to walk in, yet she still found herself bracing for the alternative. With a strange combination of relief and disappointment she spotted him sitting on his bed just as covered as she was.

"Better?" He asked her as she walked over at sat next to him.

She crossed her legs underneath her, fully facing him. "Better." He reached towards her, his hands slipping to the back of her neck. Jane completely expected him to kiss her. Instead he pulled her hair out from underneath the sweatshirt she intended on keeping it. Realizing what she was doing her hands gathered her hair, trying to contain it and stuff it back into it's hiding spot. "Stop, it looks bad."

"No it doesn't." He said, smiling at the frown on her face. Mike moved her hands away and took her hair back out, his smile growing. "I like it."

Jane grimaced but didn't attempt to confine her hair again. "I look

like a poodle."

"Poodles are cute."

She hit his arm as lightly as she could but allowed herself to smile none the less. As much as she may have hated her hair when it got crazy Mike liked it. He also liked the way she dressed. Maybe he had damaged vision.

"Mike!" A voice down the hall called, followed by the sound of a door opening and footsteps approaching. "Who's clothes are in the bathroom."

Nancy, now standing in the doorway, stopped mid sentence as her eyes fell on Jane. She looked back and forth between her and Mike a few times, clearly knowing the answer to the question she hadn't even finished asking. Jane's cheeks burned bright red as her mind started imagining all the things Nancy could have assumed from finding a girl's clothes in the bathroom and finding a girl in her little brother's room wearing his clothes.

Her expression changed from surprise to a slightly mischievous smile. "Are you Jane?" She asked

"Yeah."

"Mike's told me about you." She said, her gaze moving over to him. "What are you guys up to?"

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Mike shoot her a look, a look reserved solely for someone annoyed with their sibling. "Nothing."

Nancy raised an eyebrow at him. "Really? Nothing?"

"Yeah. *Nothing*." If Jane hadn't been so mortified she would have been struggling to hold back laughter at their back and forth. "We went swimming."

Confusion crossed over her face. "Swimming in April?"

Mike rolled his eyes and got to his feet, "Okay, bye Nancy, see you at dinner." He said, shutting the door before she could reply. They both

stayed perfectly still until they heard footsteps retreating down the hall.

Somewhat over the total embarrassment Jane spared herself a small smile. "She seems nice."

"She's annoying." He replied, coming back and sitting next to her again. "Not to mention nosy."

Jane bit her bottom lip, feeling her grin starting to grow against her will. "So... you talk about me?"

She watched closely as his freckled face turned pink. "You already knew that."

"I knew you talked to your friends, who know who I am, about me." She corrected. "I didn't know you talked to your family about me."

"Same thing."

"Not at *all* the same thing."

Mike groaned, leaning back until he was laying on his bed. Jane wanted to curl up next to him bury her face in his neck. Yet at the same time she was thoroughly enjoying the view of his increasingly red face and struggled expression as he likely debated whether or not to tell her the truth. She quickly decided to stay sitting up and watching him.

He covered his eyes with his hands like he was hiding from her. "My mom asked me who you were when you called and she answered. Then after everything with your dad I told everyone that if you called no one else could use the phone until I was done talking to you. Plus Nancy saw you in my car and got really nosy and kept asking me questions so I just told her about you. But I don't think she said anything to my parents."

Jane leaned over him, grabbing his hands and moving them away from his face so she could look at him. Even after his face was uncovered she kept her hands wrapped around his and pinned on either side of his head. She didn't even bother attempting to hold back the smile that had taken over her face. "I told my friends upstate

about you."

"Really?"

"Yeah." She said. "My friend Kelly keeps trying to convince me to take a picture of you so I can mail it to her because she wants to see what you look like."

His lips twitched upwards. "She sounds weird."

"She is." Jane made no effort to move from her position over him, and he made no effort to move her. His chest rose and fell with every breath he took, and with her practically half laying on him she could feel each muscle underneath her moving when he did. "When did you first start to like me?" She asked, finally voicing the question she had been curious about ever since he admitted his feelings for her. Why she never had the courage to actually ask him, or why she suddenly did now, was a mystery.

"Instantly." He said, the reply coming out easy.

"Really?"

He nodded, "Yeah. You have no idea how excited I was that we had a class together and that I would actually get to talk to you." Hearing him describe the exact same experience she had was strange. It was like hearing her own thoughts in his voice. "What about you?"

"The same day." She told him. "It started with the fact that one of the empty seats in homeroom was so conveniently in front of the cutest guy in the room." She watched him half heartedly roll his eyes at her. "But then you offered to show me around town and I could *not* stop thinking about it."

This seemed the genuinely surprise him. "Seriously?"

Jane shook her head, "Of course! Not only did I desperately need to be shown around, but the fact that the person who offered was the same guy I purposely sat next to just so I could look at him close up."

He reached up and ran his fingers through her hair, which she didn't doubt had grown even more. She could see a thought working and

forming in his mind yet he remained silent. Jane wished that she could read his thoughts, like he sometimes seemed to read hers, and see exactly what was going on in the mind of Mike Wheeler. She desperately wanted to know what he was thinking while he stared at her the way he did as they lay on his bed.

Before she could consider asking him what he was thinking about he pulled her by the arm up towards him and kissed her again. They'd kissed standing up, they'd kissed sitting down, and they'd kissed fully clothed in the water. But the feeling of Mike kissing her while they lay in his bed was the best feeling by far. She was totally surrounded by Mike. Instead of everything but them disappearing it was everything outside of the room disappearing. Every inch of the room, and everything inside of it, belonged to him. Jane felt like she fit right in.

While she always hated when people described falling in love as "they're my whole world" she suddenly ate her on words. Suddenly Mike was her whole world. The only room that existed was Mike's bedroom, and the only two people alive were him and Jane. Suddenly they were the last two beings on earth with no one to interfere with them kissing on his bed. No Nancy, no Max, no Troy, and no fathers who threw books at their daughters and hit their wives.

The world consisted of only Mike and Jane, kissing on his bed and avoiding everything else.

And she loved it. She loved that any and all responsibilities suddenly no longer existed. She loved that anyone who had anything bad to say had faded into nothingness. Most of all she loved Mike. She *loved* Mike. After everything he had done for her in the short time they had known one another how could she not? Jane could have easily remained nothing more than the new girl he sat next to in English. Instead she was someone he cared about enough to stand up to the person who had tormented him for his entire school career. She was someone he cared about enough to sneak out of her house even before learning all the secrets she had been keeping for him.

Jane loved Mike, fiercely and vehemently. She loved him in a way she vowed never to love anyone when she was young and saw her

parents relationship for what it was. In a way that she had been terrified of when she started noticing boys for the first time. If she loved him after knowing him for a month she couldn't begin to fathom how she would feel about him by summer vacation. It was a thought that was equal parts terrifying and exhilarating. But instead of thinking about how she might feel in two months time she focused on the feeling of him kissing her with his hands in her hair which she no longer wished she had tied up.

22. Chapter 22: Mike

Okay, I'm going to warn you guys now; I'm currently writing the last chapter of this story. There will be 27 chapters to this story, plus an epilogue, totaling in 28 chapters. I'm going to post a little less frequently so it doesn't come to an end too soon. And don't worry, I've got some really exciting things cooked up for the last few chapters. I can also guarantee you're gonna get a really sappy authors note at the end (which, if it ends up being too long, will be uploaded as a "chapter 29"). For now enjoy some well deserved mileven fluff.

"Does your mom know you're coming over?" Mike asked as he started driving towards his house

"Yup." She replied. He noticed the second she walked into homeroom that she was wearing the sweatshirt he had given to her the night before. Mike hadn't asked for it back and didn't notice she was still wearing it when she walked into her house the night before. When he saw her wearing it that morning he still had no intention of asking for it back. How could he when she looked so cute in it? "She said she's going to go see a movie and run some errands." Jane looked over at him "She also said that if I get home before she does that you can stay with me until she gets back."

Mike raised an eyebrow, quickly glancing at her before he had to look back at the road. "Your mom suggested us being home alone together?" From what Jane had told him about her her mom sounded cool but he doubted any mom was *that* cool.

He could see her smiling out of the corner of his eye. "Special circumstances." She said. Mike tried to imagine the conversation that had taken place between her and her mom after Jane got home wearing his clothes, and how it resulted in planning them to be alone together for however long. He was sure Jane was the one that had brought up the idea and done a bit of convincing. "She likes you. Neither of us have ever had the courage to call the police on my dad before, so if you guys hadn't shown up he'd probably still be with us."

The thought of what could have happened kept him up at night

sometimes. If he had been too embarrassed to call Max and ask about her Jane could have gotten seriously hurt. If Max hadn't been just as suspicious as he was he would have never gone to her house. What if he forced them to move upstate and Mike would never see her again? This was the thought that scared him the most. Not only would he never see her again but her father could have done anything to her and Mike would have been totally clueless, all the way in Hawkins. Though he tried to take the advice he had given to Lizzie a few days earlier he still found himself dwelling on the 'what ifs' of the situation.

Pulling into the driveway he spotted both Nancy's, who was home from school for spring break for a few more days, and his mom's car already parked. He kept his fingers crossed that they would both be in their rooms when they walked in and he wouldn't have to face what was the inevitable embarrassment if he did run into them. He could only imagine the slew of questions that would greet them if his family was nearby when they walked inside. They both grabbed their backpacks before heading up towards the front door. The second the door opened he could hear the radio in the kitchen playing 60's oldies. He knew his mom was in there without even having to look into the room.

"Michael?" She called just as he tried to sneak up the stairs without being heard. "Is that you?"

He let out a short sigh, his face feeling warm at the use of his full name in front of Jane. "Yeah!" He called back

Mike heard footsteps approaching and moments later his mom was standing in the hallway, her eyes immediately falling to the girl next to him. "Oh, hello." She said, continuing towards them. "I'm Mike's mother."

"Jane." She said, holding her hand out for his mom to take, which she did.

"Oh *you're* Jane?" She asked her, glancing at Mike and raising an eyebrow at him before looking back at Jane. "Mike's told us about you."

"Mom."

She easily ignored him, her eyes focused on Jane. "It's nice to finally meet you." Karen said, "Will you be staying for dinner?"

Jane quickly glanced at Mike. They hadn't figured out how long she would stay over, both assuming it would be as long as possible. "If it's okay with you guys, that would be really nice."

"Of course." She said. Mike could only imagine how thrilled his mom was to get the opportunity to learn more about the person he had been so vague about. "I'll let you know when it's done."

"Okay, thanks mom." He said, hurriedly grabbing Jane's arm and pulling her up the stairs before there could be much more questions.

Mike didn't let go of her arm until they reached his room and sat down on his bed facing each other. He closed the door all the way since his parents had never exactly laid out a protocol for if he brought a girl over. Though he didn't blame them. Everyone secretly thought there was no need to worry about Mike bringing a girl over. As they took out their homework he had to keep glancing up at her to make sure she was still there. Every time he glanced up from the book in front of them Jane was, sure enough, still there. Jane, his girlfriend. Jane, who seemed too good to be true yet was as real as he was.

"How come it's always the class you're worst at that gives you the most homework?" She asked, frowning at the notebook in her lap.

Mike had just been thinking the same thing as he looked over his social studies notes. "What class is that?"

Jane's nose scrunched up, which was absolutely adorable. "Math." She said simply, in a tone that said it all. "What about you?"

"Social studies."

She looked up from her math worksheet, which he could see was algebra as she set it to the side. "I'm good at history. I'll help you."

Jane moved until she was sitting next to him, looking over his

shoulder and going over the questions with him. While she never explicitly gave him the answers she was able to say just the right thing to make him remember them for himself. It only took a few minutes for him to realize that she truly was good at history. She was able to not only understand but memorize all of the names, dates, and events in a way he never quite had. The thought brought up a question that had been nagging him ever since he drove Will home. "Hey, remember when I came over because you needed to borrow my textbook?"

"Yeah." She said, her eyes already scanning over the next question

"Did you really need to borrow it?"

She looked up, her gaze meeting his. "Well," she started slowly, a smile spreading on her face despite how she clearly tried to hide it. "I really didn't have the textbook, that was true. But... my teacher said that I could wait to do the assignment until I got the book and then hand it in. So, no, I didn't really need to borrow it."

Mike's face practically exploded into a grin. Here he was thinking that she genuinely just wanted to get her work done. Will had been right, she had a plan all along. He could only imagine what else she had said or done that had gone right over his head. "Really?"

"Yeah." She told him, "I just wanted to spend more time with you."

She helped him with the rest of his history homework before he offered to help her with her algebra problems. The two of them were like a homework dream team. Jane excelled in english and history while math and science was more his speed. He was thoroughly surprised they were able to get so much work done without getting sidetracked. They sat, leaning against his headboard, close enough that their shoulders and legs touched. Every so often Jane would reach over to point something out to him, causing his heart to start to race.

While she looked through his borrowed copy of *Catcher in the Rye* for a specific quote she asked, without looking up from the book, "Do you think your parents will like me?"

His hesitation was solely do to his surprise at her question. "Yeah, of course." He answered truthfully. "Why wouldn't they?"

She shrugged. "Oh, I found it!" Jane said, pressing her thumb underneath the quote she'd been searching for as she tried to change the subject. "That's the thing about girls." She read from the page. "Every time they do something pretty, even if they're not much to look at, or even if they're sort of stupid, you fall in love with them, and then you never know where the hell you are."

He wrote the quote down as she read it, trying not to think about how appropriate it was. While Jane was nowhere near unattractive or stupid he still felt she applied. The simplest things she did made his heart swell with love and admiration for her. When she looked at him and smiled for no other reason than to smile at him he had to bite his tongue to keep the three worded statement from slipping out. When she kissed him for the first time in the hallway at school he was afraid to speak for the next minute or so for fear he would let it slip.

Once he finished copying the words she had just read he looked back up at her, gently pulling the book from her hands. "Why wouldn't they like you?" he asked once again

"I don't know." She said, still not looking quite at him. "I've never had dinner with my boyfriends parents before. I don't know how to do it."

He put his arm around her shoulder, bringing her closer despite the lack of space between them to begin with. "Just be yourself. They'll love you." Jane rested her head on his shoulder and moments later he felt her arm slide around his waist. Mike marveled at how perfectly they fit with one another, like they were designed to be next to one another. "Do you seriously think they wont?"

She shrugged again, her arm moving against his. "I don't know."

"I promise they will." He said, pressing a kiss against the side of her head

Jane looked up at him, her eyes quickly scanning over his face. After a few moments, when she found or didn't find whatever she was looking for, she smiled. Her other arm reached towards him, her

hand landing on his cheek moments before she pressed her lips against his. The chapstick she wore, strawberry this time instead of cherry, quickly rubbed onto his own mouth. She could feel her smiling against his lips, which made his stomach do acrobatics. Once she pulled away, and they both brought their attention back to their work, he didn't attempt to wipe it off.

As they started to finish up the last of Jane's science homework his mom's voice called from the bottom of the stairs "Kids! Dinner!"

They both climbed off of his bed and started towards the stairs. Before he opened his door Mike glanced back at Jane, who's nervousness was written across her face. He put his hand on her arm, smiling at her as encouragingly as he could. "Everything's going to be fine."

She flashed him a quick smile that didn't at all convince him that she believed what he said. Jane followed closely behind him as they descended the stairs and entered the dining room, where his dad and Holly already sat. Mike took his usual seat, next to Holly, while Jane sat on his other side. His little sister's big brown eyes stared at Jane as if she'd never seen a teenage girl before. Then again, her experience with teenage girls was limited to Nancy and Barbra, neither of whom were quite like Jane. Of course no one was quite like Jane. She then looked at her dad and said to him, in what was intended as a whisper but was in no way hushed, "She's pretty."

Mike glanced over at Jane, who's face was flushed bright red while she stared at the spot in front of her. He then watched his dad look up and seemed, for the first time, to notice Jane was even in the house. Which didn't at all surprise him. His dad was infamously clueless. Jane could have been living in his basement for a week and he wouldn't have noticed unless someone pointed her out to him. Before he got the chance to say anything Nancy walked in and sat at the head of the table, on Jane's other side. A bright smile spread across her face as she opened up her napkin. "Hi Jane." She said

"Hi." she replied shyly

His dad looked between the two. "Did everyone know there was a girl in the house but me?"

"Yes." Both Mike and Nancy answered at the same time without even looking up.

His mom entered shortly after, holding a serving plate of meatloaf which she set down in the middle of the table. It seemed she heard the conversation by the way she turned to his dad and said. "Ted, this is *Jane*. I told you about her, remember?" Her annunciation on her name was heavy, likely in hopes of getting him to remember without having to spell it out for him.

Still it took a few moments for recognition to replace his expressionless face. He nodded a few times before looking back at Jane. "It's nice to meet you."

"Thank you, it's nice to meet you too." She answered automatically

For the first ten minutes of the meal the conversation was no different from what it usually would have been. Holly babbled about her day in kindergarten and they all exaggerated their excitement about what she had to say. Nancy asked her mom if they could take a trip to the strip mall a few towns over to get a few things she needed before she went back to school. Once Mike was through with his daily interrogation about school the attention moved to the girl next to him.

"So, Jane," his mom said between bites. "Mike tells us you're from upstate. Where did you used to live?"

"Carmel." She answered, looking up from her plate

Karen Wheeler nodded, well aware of the town. She had briefly considered having her wedding there before she saw the prices of every venue. "What's it like up there?"

Jane hesitated for a few quick seconds. "It's... different from here." She eventually said. "People aren't so down to earth up there. It's nice that people are a bit more humble here."

"What do your parents do?"

"My mom just got a job as a secretary at a travel agency just outside of town." She answered, which was something Mike hadn't already

known

"And your dad?"

Every muscle in Mike's body tensed up, and he instinctively looked over at her to make sure she was okay. She, surprisingly, seemed perfectly fine. As if she'd been asked about the weather. Without missing a beat she said "He helps tech companies advertise new products and gets a commission from a certain group of sales."

His parents looked back and forth between each other, seemingly impressed by her answer. "What kind of products?"

"The most popular one he he did was the first computer mouse sold by Logitech." She said. Mike shouldn't have been so surprised she was able to talk about her father so easily. She had, several times, told him how she had spent most of her life lying about her father and pretending everything was fine. Still, hearing about it and actually witnessing it were two very different things. She even wore a smile which he was sure only he knew was fake. "The last thing he mentioned working on was this thing called 'Nintendo Power Glove'."

Mike's mom perked up slightly, looking back at him. "Didn't you and your friends want to get that?" She asked

True, he had wanted it at one point. More than he would now care to admit. But after learning that Jane's father had participated in the product he wanted nothing to do with it. He, in no way, wanted to do anything that would benefit him. Mike then swore he would talk his friends out of their plans to buy it once they came up with the money. Whether by telling the truth or offering something better to invest in he wasn't quite sure. There wasn't much Mike could do to have any sort of remotely negative impact on her fathers life but he would do whatever he could. However, instead of saying any of this, she replied with a simple "Yeah."

"Maybe you could talk to your dad and get a discount." his dad suggested

He was instantly embarrassed on both his and Jane's behalf. Leave it to his dad to say the worst possible thing. When Mike looked over at

Jane he expected to see a shadow of the expression he likely wore. Instead she was smiling, bigger than she had since she sat down at the table. Her eyes glanced at Mike only for a fleeting second, before she looked back at his parents across the table. "I'll definitely do what I can." He had a feeling she meant her words and intended to talk her out of it as soon as possible.

For the rest of dinner the conversation drifted back and forth between typical topics to questions aimed at Jane. He couldn't help but be incredibly proud of her. Considering how nervous she had clearly been she was doing so well. She answered all of his mom's questions with a polite yet very Jane-like answer and even smiled once or twice at his dad's attempt at a joke. She and Nancy got along well, which made sense since Nancy knew the most about her, and Holly spent almost the entire meal staring at Jane. As swimmingly as the dinner went Mike let out a sigh of relief when they were excused and brought their plates into the kitchen.

Once they were in his room again, behind the closed door, Jane's shoulders fell slightly. He hadn't even realized she had been putting such an effort into her posture. She looked at him, the nervousness returning to her face. "How did I do?"

"You did amazing!" He told her, putting his hands on her shoulders

Her eyes seemed to light up. "Really?"

"Yes, of course." He said, "I *told* you they would love you."

Jane wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her head against his chest. She squeezed him tight and he could feel her face changing into a smile, which only made him grin wider. Though his family's opinion on Jane would have no affect of his own it was a relief that that liked her and they wouldn't have to sneak around or whatever kids did when their parents didn't approve. The thought of having Jane over and not having to worry about it in the slightest was exciting. He longed for her to be a part of the family, the only one who wasn't annoying in the slightest bit.

"Can we go back to my house once we finish with homework?" She asked, still leaning against him.

They hardly had any work left, leaving Mike guessing they would be at her house within the hour. "Yeah sure."

Returning to the spots they had been sitting in before they got called for dinner they both picked their books back up and finished the bit of homework they had left. With Mike's help they flew through the rest of her science questions and remaining algebra equations. Before he knew it Jane was packing her books back up and they were heading back down the stairs. He called out to his dad in the living room that he was dropping her off and left without waiting for a response, knowing that one likely wasn't going to come. Mike continued to tell her how good of an impression she had made during dinner as he drove to her house. She blushed and told him to shut up a few times but he could tell hearing him gush made her happy, so he did it all the way to her street. Anything he could do to make her smile he would do gladly. Pulling in front of her house they both looked out the window at the empty driveway.

"Looks like your moms not home yet." He said, which was painfully obvious

"Yup." She replied, looking back over at him. The only source of light around was the streetlight a few houses down, making it difficult to see her. "You wanna come in?"

"Yeah, sure."

After locking his car he followed her up to the porch, waiting for her to pull her keys out and unlock the front door. She flicked the lights on, instantly illuminating the living room. Spotting a number of picture frames hung up on the wall he hadn't noticed the first two times in her house he walked over. Jane groaned as he looked over the pictures of her when she was younger, some with her hair longer than it was now (some of which as long as her mid back) and some with it shorter. He looked over a picture, immediately remembering when she told him about getting teased when she cut her hair too short. Though he didn't understand what there was to tease. She looked completely adorable.

She put her hands on his shoulders, trying to draw him away from the pictures. "Those are so embarrassing."

"Stop, I love them." He said, then pointed to a shot of Jane standing between two girls. She looked younger and all three girls wore somewhat fancy dresses. Jane's hair was three times as long as it currently was and she wore pink lipstick. "What's this from?"

"A school dance in freshman year." She told him, giving up on trying to coax him away and instead resting her head on his shoulder. "My old high school had a dance for the freshmen and sophomores towards the end of the year, like a prom for underclassmen." She put her finger on the girl on her right with light brown hair and fair skin. "That's Kelly." She said before moving to the girl on her left with dark hair and a deep tan. "And that's Janice."

He looked closer at the picture, wanting to memorize it. At the time it was taken he had never once been a thought in her mind. She was living a pre-Mike life. He couldn't help but wonder more about her life back when she lived upstate. "How old were you?"

Mike looked away just in time to see her put on a slightly disgusted face. "Fourteen."

He smiled even wider. It was a crime that she could look so pretty, even at fourteen. Though he still wasn't the best looking person he definitely looked better than he did when he was fourteen. There wasn't a doubt in his mind she wouldn't have given him the time of the day if they met back then.

"I like this one the best." He said, pointing at the picture of her with hair only reaching her ears. She was pictured sat at the head of a table with a birthday cake in front of her with the numbers 15 written in big red icing letters. In the frame behind her were streamers hung on the walls and a balloon that just made it in the shot. The picture was only a year old, he assumed, yet she still looked so different

Jane lifted her head up, her eyebrows coming together. "*That* one?" She asked, clearly surprised. "That's my *least* favorite. I look like a boy."

"No you don't." He said quickly. "You look so cute." She punched his arm lightly but still wore a small smile. He scanned over the rest of

the pictures, a few school photos, a few more with her mother standing next to her, and one where she couldn't have been older than nine. She sat on the front steps, of what he imagined was her old house, wearing overalls and a long sleeve shirt underneath.

"Promise you'll let me see pictures of you when you were younger."

Mike shook his head. "No way." He said, my old pictures are nowhere near as good as yours."

Jane forced him to turn towards her, and this time he let her. "Shut up, they're probably adorable." She put both of her hands on his cheeks. "Promise?"

He rolled his eyes. "Fine."

She stood on her toes and kissed him. Though he was starting to get used to her kissing him it, in no way, meant he was getting tired of it. They were getting more and more comfortable with one another, which he thought was better. His arm wrapped around her waist while his other hand slipped to the back of her neck, under her hair. Her curls tickled his fingers gently. Jane's hair was one of his favorite things about her. While other girls straightened their hair, just to get it permed shortly after, she let her natural curls run rampant (except for a few days before). He often struggled to keep himself from running his hands through her hair while they were at school.

As time ticked by and they continued to kiss Mike found himself hoping her mom would never come home.

23. Chapter 23: Jane

warning: as you probably expected there are mature topics in this chapter. but not the ones you were expecting. enjoy.

The clock on the wall ticked away second by second and Mike and Jane were still kissing. The street had gone quiet while everyone hunkered down for their after dinner routine, whether it be watching tv or taking a shower or whatever else those out of sight and out of mind did. They didn't matter. Nothing outside of her living room mattered because she and Mike were kissing and they were home alone. Her mind wandered to the possibilities of everything they could do in an empty house. She tried to tell herself not to let her imagination get the best of her but her mind defied her with the ferociousness of a small child telling their parent 'no' for the first time. Her thoughts stomped their foot and clenched their fists and she, like a weak parent, gave in and let them do what they wanted. Her cheeks burned a bright pink as her mind wandered into uncharted territory.

She and Mike were kissing, and they were home alone.

He kissed her in a way she had never kissed her before. As if he was also hyperaware of the fact that there was no one around. The way couples did in a scene of a movie that completely snuck up on you and made you second guess the rating of the film. Jane's whole body was buzzing with a feeling she'd never felt before, but one she didn't mind at all. She kissed him back in the same way, like the world's air supply was suddenly depleting and science had discovered that Mike Wheeler's lips were a sufficient alternative. He was such a good kisser she couldn't help but wonder if he had lied about his lack of experience with girls.

Jane's feet carried her over to the couch, her body making the decision to move instead of her mind. Though walking backwards with her eyes closed and her thoughts focus on something totally different wasn't the best idea she did so anyways. Not surprisingly she bumped into the back of the sofa, almost falling over backwards before she caught herself. When she glanced up at Mike he was

smiling at her as if she had done something funny or cute and not almost just fallen over like a klutz. Yet she found herself smiling back up at him while she grabbed his hand and pulled him with her as she walked her to the other side of the sofa.

They were kissing again before they even sat down. Her arms wrapped around his neck while her fingertips got lost in his hair. One of his hands landed on her waist, where her shirt and the top of her jeans overlapped, while his other cupped her cheek. A small noise, somewhere between a purr and a moan, escaped from the back of her throat. She wanted to grab it and shove it back in her mouth immediately. For a total of three seconds she was absolutely mortified. But the feeling that she wanted to crawl in a hole and hide until summer was over quickly faded when he started to kiss her harder. Though she was still embarrassed she no longer wished she could take it back.

The temperature in the room was rising as fast as if it had taken off in a spaceship. Or maybe it wasn't the temperature of the room but the temperature of her. Either way she wished she had previously taken off his sweatshirt she had claimed as her own. The only clear thought that ran through her head was that she wanted *more*.

Jane leaned backwards until her back lay flat on the couch and, with her arms still wrapped around his neck, she brought him down with her. She could have easily been fooled into thinking he had been in such a situation before by the way he so perfectly responded to every mood she made. But she knew better and credited it to how he was occasionally able to read her mind. They were synchronized, like dance partners performing a routine they had been practicing for months. But she was completely out of her element. Jane was a figure skater in a boxing match and she was about to be totally dominated. The word choice of her own thoughts made her cheeks get warmer. It felt more like they were on the surface of the sun rather than her living room.

His knees were on either side of her leg, his arms supporting him. Though there was too much distance between them for her liking. She pulled him down again, not as hard as she had only moments ago but enough for him to know what she was silently asking of him. Mike moved so he was propped up on his elbows, which was

exponentially better. The space between them was just a handful of inches if even that. Jane could feel her heartbeat in every inch of her body, which was a strange feeling but one she wouldn't mind getting used to. Her hands trailed, running up and down, his back. A string of soft, back of the throat noises came from both of them. For a split second the roles were reversed and Jane was able to read his mind, and she knew he wanted her just as badly as she did him. There was absolutely nothing that could ruin the moment.

Nothing except for the sound of a car door.

They both pulled away, staring at each other with wide, glazed eyes and pink cheeks. The two of them moved just as synchronized as they had been previously only with a sense of overpowering panic. Mike quickly pushed himself off of her while Jane sprang to her feet and ran towards the window next to the front door. Her heart was still pounding, though now at the possibility that they could have gotten caught making out by her mom. That would have single handedly been the most embarrassing moment of her life. She fully expected her heart to pound so hard it would burst out of her chest and ruin the wallpaper.

She looked out the window fully expecting to see her mom walking up towards the porch while digging in her pocket book for her keys. Her hair, somewhere between brown and blonde, would be tied up in the bun she always wore to work. There was someone approaching the house alright, but it wasn't her mom.

"It's my dad." She said, panic taking over her entire body

"What?"

Mike was already on his feet and hurrying to her side before she could reach the bottom of the stairs. They ran up towards her room like they were being chased by some kind of monster. Which, she supposed, they were in fact in the presence of.. Jane slammed the door behind her, and they stared at one another while they waited for any little noise. Though she wasn't sure she would be able to hear anything over the sound of her own pulse that roared in her ears as loud as ocean waves. She counted past ten and for a moment thought that the locked door had kept them safe.

"Janey?"

Her face morphed into one of horror with the realization that she must not have locked the door. How stupid could she have been to not lock the door with everything that was going on? The most ridiculous, idiotic person in the world, that's how stupid. While she stood there, completely frozen in fear, Mike pushed her desk so it was in front of her door, acting as a barricade. He then went over to her and pulled her into a tight hug, whispering that everything was going to be okay and that he was there with her while his hand rubbed circles on his back.

"I won't let anything happen to you." He said, "I promise."

Only her father was now close enough that she could hear his footsteps approaching and she found, for the first time, that she truly didn't believe a word Mike said. He'd never seen her dad angry before. He had no way of knowing nothing would happen to them. After getting out of jail a second time and likely being told that she and her mother were pursuing an order of protection against him she was wholeheartedly convinced he would beat her to a pulp if he got his hands on her. If there were a time where he would put his hands on her for the first time this was undoubtedly that time. Worse than that she knew he had no problem doing the same to Mike just to get to her. He was collateral damage, someone who simply stood in her way.

"Janey?" Her father called out again, only this time it sounded like he was only a few feet away from her bedroom door. "Are you in there?"

Mike pulled away from her just enough that he could look at her. "Call the police." He said

Only this time when he spoke he hadn't whispered. Outside the door her fathers voice came again, even closer than before. "Is there a *boy* in there with you?!"

Shit.

Shit.

Shit shit *shit*.

The doorknob jiggled as he tried to open it, followed by a familiar roar she had heard every time she or her mother did something wrong. "Jane Louise Ives open this door *right now!*"

Jane was suddenly overcome not with panic or fear, but with anger. True, she had never been in a situation nearly as scary ever. But Jane and her mother no longer crumbled in front of him like the pathetic women he thought they were. By moving, and Jane sneaking out of the house, they had started a rebellion. She burned worse than when she punched Troy. She *hated* her dad. Hated that he made her weak for most of his life. Hated that he'd gotten so cocky that he no longer bothered trying to not leave a mark on her mother. Mostly she hated him for the look on Mike's face that he caused, scared for both of them.

She hated him. And she wasn't afraid.

"No!" She shouted back, for the first time in her life

"No?!" He repeated back to her

But she wasn't listening. Jane grabbed the phone and dialed 911 while her father pounded on her door. She looked across the room at Mike, who leaned against the desk in hopes of keeping it pressed against the door. The line rang only twice before the eerily calm voice of the 911 operator picked up and said the automatic greeting. "I need the police at 11 East Avenue right now." She said, her voice coming out shaky. "My dad just got out of jail and if he gets in here he's gonna kill me."

"We're sending someone over right now." The woman on the other line told her. "Are you somewhere safe?"

"Yes. I'm in my room, the door is blocked."

"Good." She said. "Are you alone?"

Jane looked up at Mike who was already staring at her. She wanted to take away every ounce of fear he had even if it meant she had to take on its burden. She, in that moment, would have done anything

to make him feel better. After years of dealing with her father she knew exactly what to expect. The level of anger he had was usually the only changing variable. But Mike had been pure, unexposed to the evil that was her father's anger. She couldn't help but blame herself for putting him in harm's way simply because she wanted some time truly alone with him. Jane felt selfish and greedy, and she thought he was so scared because of something she had done made her throat burn with pre-cry.

"Yes." She finally answered to the operator. "My boyfriend's here. Please hurry."

"The police are on their way." The woman assured her. "What's your name?"

"Jane."

"Okay, Jane, listen to me. Stay in your room and do not come out until the police get there and tell you it's safe."

"Okay."

"They will be there in five minutes."

"Thank you."

Though it was common knowledge that one was supposed to stay on the line with the operator until help arrived she hung up the phone, immediately going to Mike's side. She couldn't stand to watch him look so scared without doing anything to help. Jane wrapped her arms around his neck and did her best to block out the threats her father tossed out on the other side of the door. "I'm sorry."

He hugged her back, his cheek resting on the top of her head. "Why are you sorry?" He asked her

"It was my idea to come back early so I could spend time alone with you." She said, trying to hold back another wave of pre-cry worse than the one before.

Mike told her that it wasn't her fault and that she shouldn't be sorry, but the guilt she felt was still too much. She gave up on fighting back

and let tears start to roll down her cheeks and absorbed into his shirt while her dad ranted and raved about how he couldn't believe she and her mother would ever betray him like that. She held onto Mike harder, hoping if she shut her eyes tight enough she could transport them somewhere else.

Five minutes. The police would be there in five minutes. Her mind played through all the things her dad could do to them in five minutes if he managed to get inside her room. With two simple blows to the head, which could be done in a handful of ways, he could have killed them both. A bat lay against the wall next to her bed, originally placed there for her protection. But it could have easily turned from a friend to an enemy of neither of them were able to get to it first. Even if they did her father was taller than them both and strong enough to throw a table, which he had done before. The thought of something happening to Mike made her sick to her stomach. If her dad got inside her room he *would* kill them.

She looked up at Mike who, in that moment, she loved more than anyone in the world. He was even more scared than she was and she knew it, and she hated that he was trying to hide it. Jane wanted to tell him to sneak out her window and run, to get out because she could take care of herself. But he would never listen and she knew it so she didn't bother trying to convince him and instead kept her mouth shut. She loved him, and biting her tongue suddenly felt completely useless.

"I love you, Mike."

"I love you too."

There was not an ounce of hesitation in his response. She knew he loved her in a rare moment where she was able to read his mind. He wouldn't have done half the things he had for her if he didn't love her.

Five minutes.

In less than five minutes everything about their relationship was completely changed. They hadn't even known each other for a full month and they had gone from strangers to dating to saying 'I love

you'. Typically Jane didn't think saying the L word so quickly was a good idea in any way, shape, or form. But her relationship with Mike was anything but typical. There was no one on earth like Mike, and no one on earth like Jane. Therefore there was no relationship on earth like theirs. She had been through hell, and he was now going through hell with her.

He rubbed her back as she continued to let herself cry, and she promised herself it would be the last time she ever cried over her dad. There were so many better things for her to focus her energy on. Like Mike. Every minute or so he would press a kiss on the top of her head or whisper in her ear that the police were coming soon and that they would be safe again. Jane was infuriated that such a blissful moment had been ruined by the arrival of her dad.

Five minutes had never felt longer. It felt more like five years when she heard footsteps, several pairs, rushing up the stairs. Moments later she heard a mans voice, one that was unfamiliar, yell "This is the police, show us your hands!"

There was the sound of a struggle outside while the two teens held onto each other tighter. Mike ran his hand through her hair and told her it was over until she started to believe him. Jane didn't think she would ever be able to let go of him ever again in fear of him slipping through her fingers and disappearing forever. She already intended to do her best to convince her mom to have him stay the night. They'd slept in he same room before, what was the big deal about a second time?

She lifted her head off of her chest so she could look at him, putting her hands on his cheeks and running her thumbs across his freckles. With his sleeve he wiped the tears off of her face, still holding onto her. The voices of both the police and her father faded downstairs, and she was only vaguely aware of how her father screamed at her, in a last attempt to intimidate her, "I can't *believe* you called the cops of me Jane! How *dare* you call the cops on your own dad!" But it didn't matter. He was gone, Mike was with her, and they were both okay.

A few minutes after the voices were outside, Mike and Jane still not daring to leave her room, she heard a soft pair of footsteps coming up

the stairs. Moments later there was a quiet knock, followed by a mans voice. "Jane Ives?"

Her eyes quickly glanced at the door before returning back to Mike. "Yeah?"

"This is Chief Jim Hopper." He told her through the closed door. "You're dad's gone, so it's safe to come out whenever you're ready."

The two looked at each other, reluctantly parting so they could push the desk out of the way. She reached for his hand again before the doorknob. When she opened her bedroom door she half expected her father to be standing there. Yet she opened it to find only a man with a short, scruffy, beard and a police uniform. The hardened expression he wore when she first opened the door softened when he saw their terrified faces. Jane's arm was wrapped around Mike's and she stayed close to his side. She didn't dare get any father than arms distance from him.

He coaxed them downstairs and onto the couch while he sat across from them. It was hard to believe that they had been on the same couch, under very different circumstances, not even ten minutes before. Jane scooted towards Mike until she couldn't get any closer. She knew her face was red and blotchy from crying, her nose sill running as well, but she didn't care one bit.

The chiefs eyes looked back and forth between them, eventually landing on Mike. "I have to ask you guys some questions." He said, "It alright if we separate you just for the interview?"

"No." They both responded immediately. Jane felt the slightest bit of relief that Mike was just as adamant about staying with her as she was. "I need him to stay." She then said

"Okay." He told them, holding his hands up. "That's fine." Chief Hopper looked at Mike again. "But you should at least call and tell your parents that you wont be home for awhile. This will take some time."

They glanced at each other. Jane had no idea what his parents would say about his sudden plan to stay at her house for a few more hours

at the least. She would beg and plead them herself, even tell them everything about the situation, if it would help his case. But Mike could *not* leave. It simply wasn't an option. "The phone's in the kitchen." She told him, getting to her feet, "I'll show you where it is."

With their hands still intertwined she led him out of the living room and down the hall, feeling the chief's eyes following them. Standing in front of the phone he hesitated to pick it up, looking at her. "Do you want to call your mom first?"

Jane nodded, looking at the note written in her mom's handwriting that was taped to the wall next to the phone. *Going out with Tracey, be home around 8. Call if you need anything.* Underneath the note was a phone number she didn't recognize. She dialed the number as she read it from the paper. Mike stood close to her, his hand wrapped around the one she wasn't holding the phone with. When a woman finally answered she told her she was Terry's daughter and asked to speak with her mom. Moments later her mother's voice, filled with a mild amount of concern, came through the receiver.

"Hi honey, what's up?"

She felt her lip start to tremble. Just the sound of her mom's voice made her feel knees feel weak and like she was going to crumble and fall to the ground in pieces. As much as she'd managed to hold it together she suddenly felt like a scared little girl who needed her mother. Though it had been scary not having her mom there it was, at the same time, an incredible relief that she hadn't been in harm's way. Having to worry about both her mom's and Mike's safety at the same time would have been too much.

"Something happened, mama."

24. Chapter 24: Mike

I am soooo happy you guys liked the last chapter despite the subject matter. I promise Jane and Mike are going to get a break this chapter

The explanation Mike gave his mother was as vague as he could possibly get away with. He said only what he would be okay with someone saying if he was in Jane's situation. Halfway through the call she whispered that he could tell them if he really needed to. She leaned on the wall next to him as he talked, her hand wrapped in his. Despite the fact that there was less than six inches between them he still felt too far away from her. Mike was terrified to leave her side. What would happen to her if she was out of sight and out of reach? The irrational part of his brain ran wild with this question and cooked up scenarios that made him feel lightheaded.

"Mom, I just have to stay okay?" He said into the phone. "Jane needs me, and I'm not ready to leave her here yet."

"Michale what is going on?" She asked. Mike could hear her running out of patience with his vagueness

He glanced up at Jane, who was biting her bottom lip and starring at their hands. "Her dad just got arrested." He reluctantly let out. She looked up at him and nodded, silently encouraging him that it was okay that he was telling someone her secret. "I just want to stay and help her however I can."

"Her dad got *arrested*?" She asked, "Is she okay?"

"Sort of."

"Maybe you can take her to visit him sometime this week."

Mike cringed at his moms total cluelessness. "Mom, no, it's not like that." He told her. Mike looked up at Jane again, checking that was still okay to say more. She nodded once more and squeezed his hand lightly. "He got arrested because he was trying to hurt her."

"What?"

"I promise I'll tell you more when I get home but I really have to stay here with her." He said

She was quite for what could have been a whole minute, thinking over what to do. Though he felt bad for putting his mother in such a situation he didn't feel bad enough to go home. "Okay, stay as long as she needs you to." His mom finally said. "Promise you'll tell me more later?"

"Yes."

"And promise you'll tell me if there's anything I can do."

Mike was tempted to roll his eyes but held back the urge. The fact that she was offering help for a girl she had met once, and knew only a fraction of what she was going through, was such a mom thing to do. "Yeah, I will."

They hung up after a short goodbye. He could tell her motherly instincts were begging her to ask more, and he was thankful she had ignored them. Even if he weren't reluctant to tell the story quite yet he knew it was a conversation best suited for in person. Mike looked at Jane, who's mind was elsewhere. She stared down at their hands but her eyes were unfocused and slightly glassy looking. It took a few moments for the fact that he had hung up to register in her mind. When she finally looked up at him her eyebrows pulled together. "I'm sorry, Mike." She said

"Why?"

Her eyes moved back down to their intertwined hands. "I never wanted anything like this to happen. I dragged you into a situation you should have never been in."

He put his hands on her cheeks before she could continue with the self blame. At his touch she looked up at him once more. "Jane, stop that. I can handle it, okay? You've been dealing with this stuff for years, I'll be fine with one day of it."

Jane didn't look at all convinced. Her eyebrows still met in the

middle of her forehead and her bottom lip stuck out a bit. He waited for her to protest and continue to try and convince him that the whole thing was somehow her fault. But she gave him a halfhearted smile and pressed a quick kiss on his lips.

They decided to head back into the living room before too much time passed. Once they got back into the living room they sat back down on the couch across from Hopper just as close to one another as they had before. Mike was glad police officers weren't scattered across the house. It would have been way too overwhelming on top of everything for both of them. Hopper asked Jane to go through what happened since her father had been to the house last and the night Lizzie had called the police after they snuck Jane out. She told him that the order of protection was going to be finalized in the next day or two and that she and her mom were spending as little time at home as possible once her dad got out.

"So what were you guys doing here?" He asked

"I was over at his house before and he dropped me off." Jane said, "My mom said he could stay with me until she got home if I came back before she did so I wouldn't have to be alone."

Hopper quickly glanced at Mike before looking back at Jane. "What were you guys doing when he got here?"

"Talking." She answered. "We were looking at the pictures on the wall when I heard the car door."

The answer came out so easily and convincingly that he would have fully believed her if he hadn't been there. He forced his gaze to stay on Hopper, fearing that sparing a look at Jane would be a giveaway that she was lying. The last thing they needed was the fact that they had been making out to be written down in a police report. That sounded like the single most embarrassing thing in the world. Not to mention the detail was totally unrelated.

Jane started going through how they hid upstairs when they saw her dad coming and how Mike had pushed her desk in front of her door so they would be locked in. Hopper asked her specifics for the threats her dad had thrown around. Hearing such awful things repeated by

her made his stomach churn. She should have never had to hear such terrible things, let alone say them. The worst part was how easily they came out of her mouth. Mike knew she had become somewhat desensitized to her fathers anger but she repeated his words as easily as if she were recounting a conversation about the weather.

The door swung just after she started telling him how she called the police and her mom rushing in. Jane jumped to her feet and they met halfway in the room, throwing their arms around each other. Her mom rubbed her back and held her tight, telling Jane how brave she had been and that she was proud of her. When the two finally pulled away her mom seemed to for the first time notice Mike sitting on the couch. She walked over to him and pulled him into a bone crushing hug. Something he hadn't expected but didn't mind. Though he'd only met Terry once he was already fond of her.

"Thank you for being here with her and keeping her safe." She told him.

The thought that he would have done anything different refused to enter his mind in any way. Sure, Mike had been scared out of his mind. He had never heard someone so angry in his entire life. Plus he had seen the damage he had done to Jane's mom days after it happened. There was not a shred of doubt within him that he would have seriously hurt Jane if he could have. Had they not heard his car door close he would have easily waltzed in and cornered them. That was the scariest part of it all; the 'what ifs'. What had happened was scary enough. What could have happened was even more terrifying. But as scared as Mike had been he would have done anything he could to protect her. Not only that but he was glad he had been there so Jane wasn't alone.

He had no idea how to express this to her mom. The whole situation made him feel incapable of finding words sufficient enough for what he wanted to say. So instead of trying he simply nodded and said "Yeah."

Once her mom sat down on the other side of Jane she finished telling the remainder of the story, though there wasn't much left to say. She left out the detail about telling him she loved him, which wasn't surprising, and instead told him how they just waited for the police

to show up. Hopper took down notes as she talked and occasionally asking about specifics. Has he ever said that to you before? When? After he was finished writing he flipped to a new page and asked both her and her mom to tell him a brief history of the abuse over the years.

The more they talked the more Mike felt he wanted to cry. Stories of how her father would refuse to let her go out with her friends or how he exploded every time she did something wrong made him sick. She told one story about when he locked her out of the house on Christmas the year before. With a sinking feeling Mike remembered it had snowed Christmas Day of 1988. He wondered how Jane had managed to turn out such a kindhearted and caring person, who smiled so brightly and had such a big heart. Mike wanted to drive down to the police station and beat her father to a pulp. He ignored the size and strength difference between them as he imagined it.

Thinking back to the pictures on the wall behind him he wondered how she had smiled despite everything going on at home. He then remembered the few offhand comments she made about being good at hiding the truth about her father from people. Mike hated that the smiles in all the pictures seemed as genuine as the ones he saw at lunch in school. Especially the one he had seen of her at a school dance. According to Jane her father had been on a drunken rampage and stormed out of the house only an hour before she left for the dance. How she had managed to look like she was having such a good time with her friends despite what had happened was a mystery to him. For a split second a voice in the back of his mind wondered if she was still putting up a front, but he quickly pushed it back out.

After they finished a brief retelling, which didn't feel brief at all, Hopper went through all of the police technicalities. He told them that since it was the third time her father had gotten arrested for the same thing he would likely not be offered bail. Hopper also told them that his sentence would likely be longer and that there was no way he would be able to get out early under any circumstances.

"He dug his own grave by doing this for so long."

Before he left he gave each them a card with his number and told them to call him if anything happened. As he walked out the door he

promised them once more it was going to be a long time before Martin Ives saw the light of day again.

Terry only took off her coat once the front door closed behind Hopper. She then walked over to the couch and put her hand on Jane's shoulder. It seemed as if she was on the verge of tears. He couldn't blame her. Despite being there for Jane and doing everything he could to keep her safe he still felt as if he hadn't done enough. He couldn't imagine what it was like for her, Jane's mother, to not have been there to protect her. Mike could tell she wanted to say something but the words didn't seem to want to come out. Instead she asked them if there was anything they needed.

"Ice cream?" Jane asked. The two of them shared a knowing smile, which confused him, before Terry headed into the kitchen. Once she was gone Jane pulled her feet onto the couch and turned to face him. "Thank you for staying with me." She said

He too turned on the couch to face her. "Of course." He told her. "I'll stay as long as you want me too."

Her face lit up slightly, which was a nice change from the somber expressions they'd both been wearing for the past half an hour or so. "If my mom's okay with it would you want to spend the night?"

"Would she really be okay with it?" He asked skeptically. While he was sure her mom had been happy with his presence so far he didn't want to overstep his boundary. Plus he had a feeling moms weren't typically thrilled with the idea of their daughters boyfriend staying the night.

Jane glanced at the hall where her mom had disappeared only a minute or so before. Shrugging she said "Maybe. I'll try." She looked back at him, "If she says yes will you."

"Yeah, of course."

She climbed off the couch and headed down the hall. He tried his best to listen to the conversation from where he sat, but only caught bits and pieces. One of the few things he heard clearly was Jane telling her mom she would feel safer with him there. Now that the

idea had been presented to him he didn't think he would be able to leave if her mom said no. Not only would she feel safer with him there but he would feel more assured that she was safe if he was with her. Though her dad was locked up, yet again, he knew the irrational part of his brain well. There was no way he would be able to get a wink of sleep if he was in his own bed worrying about her all night.

"Mama we won't do anything, I promise." He heard her say, causing his face to feel warm. "We'll follow any rule you make just *please* let him stay."

After that he heard both of their voices but was unable to make out exactly what they were saying. Moments later both Jane and her mom came back out, Jane trying to hold back a smile as she sat back down next to him. Terry took the seat across from them where Hopper had previously been. Her face was somewhat serious yet not completely. She looked between them a few times before speaking. "If your mother is okay with it I have no problem with you staying." She told them. Mike tried not to look too thrilled and could see Jane doing the same out of the corner of his eye. "I'm going to call her and ask her if it's okay and explain a bit more of what happened. Will you need to stop at home and get a few things if she says yes?"

"Yeah, I think so." He said

Terry nodded, standing back up. "Okay, I'll go ask her."

She went back out into the hall towards the kitchen. Mike and Jane looked at each other before following her, leaning against the wall a few feet away from the kitchen doorway. He could hear her punching in the numbers, followed by silence while the phone rang. "Mrs. Wheeler?" She asked, "Hi, this is Terry Ives, Jane's mother... yes we're okay... yes, we are... well I'm calling because the kids were wondering if Mike could spend the night here... I think that trying to separate them right now would be impossible... yes, I agree... of course... okay... yes he'll be over to pick up a few things... thank you so much."

As she hung up the phone they rushed back into the living room and collapsed back onto the couch, pretending they hadn't moved an inch. They looked at one another when her mom's footsteps came

back down the hall. They eagerly watched her once she reappeared in front of them. "I'll drive you guys over, I want to thank her in person." She said.

They followed close behind her as she went to the front door, glancing at each other with wide grins. It was such a weight off his shoulders that he wouldn't have to leave her until the next day at school. Though he knew he wouldn't be able to spend the night with her every time something happened, despite that he'd already done so once before, he was incredibly thankful he was able to again. During the drive to his house they sat in the backseat of her moms car, fingers intertwined. Jane wore a smile on her face the whole ride and he did the same.

Two steps into his house he spotted his mom jumping off the couch and rushing over to them. She wrapped Jane up in a hug, rubbing her back a few times before letting her go and doing the same to her mother. After hugging both of them she looked at Mike and gave him one as well. She squeezed him tight he could almost feel his ribs cracking. For once he didn't mind. The incident has him feeling like a scared little kid and forced him to swallow a lump in his throat as his mother hugged him. Once she pulled away from him and told Jane that she was an incredibly strong and brave young girl she and Mike went up the stairs.

"Your mom is so nice." She said once they were in his room. Jane sat down on his bed while he pulled a gym bag, which had never once been to the gym, out to pack some things in.

"She's going to want to know everything after this." He warned

She shrugged, "That's okay. It can't be a secret from everybody forever."

Putting the clothes he'd just taken out of his dresser into the bag he looked over at her to find that any sign of fear was now traceless on her face. How she was able to be so *okay* was mind blowing. He walked over to her, sitting down next to her and putting his hand on her back. "I'm so sorry, Jane."

"Why?" She asked, looking up at him clearly confused

"Everything you said today, about what he did to you guys. I just..." Mike once again felt as if he was going to cry, but he swallowed despite the burning feeling in his throat and forced himself to hold it together. "I'm just sorry."

Jane put a hand on his cheek, smiling at him despite everything she had been through. If he had experienced half of the things she had smiling would have been incredibly difficult. Yet she grinned at nearly everything he said. "It's okay." She told him, sounding just as convincing as when she told Hopper they'd only been talking. "It's not going to happen anymore, so it's okay."

"Still." He hadn't yet regained the ability to grasp the words he was looking for, leaving him with one simple word that in no way described what he wanted to say.

She kissed the cheek her hand wasn't on. "I love you."

Mike wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into a hug. She rested her head in the crook of his neck, a spot which seemed specifically designed for her to put her head on. "I love you too."

He held her for a few more moments before going back to packing up his things. He brought a change of clothes plus a hoodie (whether it was for himself or for Jane he didn't yet know), his toothbrush from the bathroom, and some sweats to change into when it got later. Jane made a comment about how boys packed so little compared to girls, which he didn't for a second doubt.

They went back downstairs, finding their moms sitting in his living room next to each other on the couch. Once they came back down his mom once again told Jane and Terry that she was there if they ever needed anything to call her then threw in that she would be happy to help people who were so nice. Terry thanked her, which Mike had a feeling was just one of a number of 'thank yous' before they went out to the car.

Back at Jane's house the three of them watched movies and ate ice cream and whatever other snack was lying around the kitchen much later than any of them had anticipated. Spending time with Jane and her mom was much more fun than he usually had with his own

family. Terry was so much like her daughter and she and Mike immediately got along. She had the same sense of humor as Jane and had a number of the same mannerisms. Mike kept expecting her to tell them to go to bed because they had school the next day. Looking up at the clock on the wall and seeing it was a quarter to 12 he wondered if she would ever mention the time.

Only ten minutes after the thought entered his mind Terry spoke up. "So Karen and I were talking." She said, setting her now empty ice cream bowl down on the coffee table and pausing *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. "Both of you guys went through a lot today. And it would be unfair of us to expect you to be fully functioning students. You guys can, for one day only, skip school tomorrow."

Mike's jaw dropped to the floor in disbelief. "My mom *agreed* to that?" He asked. His mother was usually reluctant to let him stay home from school when he had a fever that was 'not that high'.

"She suggested it once I told her what happened." She said. "She told me she would never be able to go to school the day after something like that happened. And neither would I."

When he looked at Jane she seemed just as surprised as he felt. "Thank you Mama." She said

"You have no idea how many times I would have let you stay home if we could have gotten away with it." She said simply before putting the movie back on. Both Mike and Jane knew exactly what she meant.

Once the movie ended her mom told them that just because they were staying home from school didn't mean they could stay up all night. She got sheets and blankets from a closet down the hall and helped them set up the pull out couch for Mike. Before she went up to bed she kissed Jane on the side of the head and reminded them she would be upstairs if they needed anything. Jane went up to her room to change into pajamas and he did the same in the downstairs bathroom.

He was already sitting on the pull out couch when she came back down. Her hair was tied up into a ponytail, with a few curls that

escaped hanging beside her face. She wrapped her arms around him when she sat back down next to him while her head rested on his shoulder

"Are you okay?" He asked her, his arm around her waist

She nodded, her head moving against his shoulder. "Yeah, I'm okay." She said. A few moments passed before she spoke again. "I've never said no to him before."

Mike wouldn't have said no to him either if he were in her position. "Why did you this time?"

"Because I was sick and tired of being scared of him." She told him. "Things have been so incredible without him around and without him telling me what to do and knowing I would do it no matter what." Jane picked her head up and looked at him. "And I kept thinking about him hurting you, and then I thought of Troy and how easy it was to stand up to him. They're both just people. They shouldn't have so much power over me."

How she had managed to be so brave to two of the most intimidating people he knew was something he would never understand. Jane was like a superhero. "I'm so proud of you." He said, "I hope you're proud of yourself too."

Jane only shrugged once more, pulling the blanket over her legs. "I'm just tired." She said. Not the answer he had hoped for.

They both laid down on their side, blankets pulled up to their chins. Their arms and legs tangled with one another with only a few inches of space in between them. Mike ran his fingers through her hair as they lay facing each other. He watched her struggle to talk and keep her eyes open for almost ten minutes before he told her to go to sleep. She moved closer to him until her head was in the spot on his neck. Her breathing steadied when she finally drifted off half an hour past twelve.

For the remaining time he was awake he couldn't stop replaying everything that had happened that day in his mind. In a split second they had gone from normal teenagers taking advantage of an empty

house to two terrified kids barricading themselves to hide from a madman. In only a moment they were a couple too new to admit the extent of their feelings to openly admitting they were in love with one another. Everything had changed in less than ten minutes. Yet she slept soundly, curled up next to him in flannel pajamas, and wore the smallest hint of a smile as she dreamt whatever it was that occupied the subconscious of Jane Ives.

25. Chapter 25: Jane

lately I've been super overwhelmed and thankful for how well this story is doing. I'm really sad that it's nearing the end but I already have an idea for a sequel in mind. (I'm also currently working on changing it into a modern day story with 100% original characters in hopes of publishing it). But for now enjoy the chapter that these two babes deserve.

Jane's eyes were forced open by the glaring sun poking through the window. The first few moments of her return to consciousness were confusing. When she set up her room she had specifically put her bed in a spot where she wouldn't get the sun in her eye every morning. Jane rolled over to her other side and stretched, her hand quickly blocked from going any further. She opened her eyes once again to find Mike still fast asleep. For a fleeting second she smiled, hardly getting the chance to finish wondering why he was sleeping next to her.

But the memories of the night before came rushing over her like a wave in the ocean, so powerful she was glad she was already laying down. Mike's peaceful, sleeping face beside her was shadowed by the terrified one he'd worn the day before. She wished she could reach into his brain and take away any recollection of what had happened with her father, leaving a perfect gap in between when they'd been on the couch to when her mom agreed to letting him stay over. Exactly how the night *should* have gone.

As she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes she could hear the sound of the fridge door opening in the kitchen, followed by something glass being set on the counter. She rolled off the side of the pull out couch and followed the noise down the hall. Standing in the doorway she saw her mom, dressed for work, next to a plate with what Jane was sure was a whole box of Eggo's on top of it.

She stood in the doorway only for a moment or two before her mom turned around and saw her. "How did you sleep?" She asked with her eyebrows together in concern

Jane pulled out one of the chairs at the kitchen table and sat down. "Good." She propped her feet up on the bottom of the chair next to her.

"You looked pretty cozy." Jane sent her mom a half hearted glare. "What time did you guys fall asleep?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, a little while after you left." She watched her mom grab a glass from the cabinet, then orange juice from the fridge. "Thank you for letting him stay."

Her mom brought the now full glass over, setting it in front of her before sitting down on the next chair over. "You really like this boy, don't you?"

She took a sip, using the time to debate whether or not to be completely open. Jane and her mom had always been open with each other about everything, but her teenage girl instincts were starting to kick in and tell her to give as little information about Mike away as possible. But that seemed unfair. "I love him." She said, choosing to ignore her instincts

"You love him?" She asked, clearly a little skeptical

Jane rolled her eyes, "Mama, I don't wanna hear the whole 'moving too fast' lecture, okay?" She said, though she knew she was bound to get it at some point. Jane was fine with getting a lecture, but getting it at 10 in the morning was not the ideal situation.

"I wasn't going to give you one." She said, which Jane immediately doubted. "As long as you don't get married at eighteen like I did it's fine."

The smallest hint of a smile appeared on her face. "I won't, believe me."

A beat or two of silence passed between them before Terry spoke again. "Have you told him, yet?"

"What?"

"That you love him."

During the seconds of pause in conversation Jane's mind had traveled back in time to everything from the day before. She wished she could get the image of Mike's terrified face out of her head, but it seemed determined to stay put. Though she didn't regret telling him she wished she had been able to under better circumstances. "Yeah." She eventually told her mom once her brain was back in the present. "He said it too."

She watched her think this over, practically able to see the gears turning in her head. If she was worried Jane wouldn't have blamed her. They were just kids, kids who had fallen in love in a month. On paper it seemed like a recipe for disaster. But Jane knew that they were meant to cross paths and to be together. It was as if she'd been living life 90% alive and Mike had awakened the last 10%. She felt truly alive now, like a caterpillar who had been hiding away for the longest time. Now she was starting to break out of her cocoon.

"Mike's a good kid." Terry said. "Good looking too."

"Mama."

"And I can tell he cares about you." She continued as if she hadn't been interrupted. "Which is why you two can stay here while I go to work."

Jane immediately perked up, "Really?"

"Yes." She straightened in her seat. "You have to keep all the windows and doors locked at all times. And don't leave the house unless it's *absolutely* necessary." Jane nodded eagerly. She would gladly up with a few rules after being allowed to skip school and be alone with her boyfriend. Besides all of the things her mom had just listed were things she would have likely done anyway. "And I'm going to try and come home early today. I'll call when I know for sure when I'm coming back."

"Okay." She said, getting up and following her mom out of the kitchen once she stood.

As they approached the living room, where Mike was still sleeping, they both lowered their voices. "Call me if you guys go out and when

you come back. And if you need anything. If I call you must pick up the phone. If not you than Mike."

"Okay, I will."

Once Terry had her coat on she pulled Jane into a hug, kissing the top of her head. After a few moments passed she grabbed her purse and walked out the front door, which Jane locked the second it closed. Hearing her moms car pull away she turned towards Mike, still laying in the exact spot he had when she left. As quietly as she could she walked over and lay back down on the pullout couch, on her side facing him.

The only sound was occasional cars passing by, as people drove to work or school, and Mike's soft breathing. Jane could have happily watched him forever. She attempted to count his freckles but there were too many and she got confused without any way of keeping track of the ones she'd already counted. Instead she just looked at him and let her mind wander. She tried her best to keep her thoughts geared towards happier things, like sitting with her friends at lunch and everything and anything to do with Mike. An occasional memory of her father snuck in but she pushed it right back out.

After somewhere between thirty minutes and an hour Mike rolled onto his back. Jane watched his eyes open slowly and take in his surroundings, quickly falling on her. A smile spread on his face as he once again turned to face her. His slightly glazed eyes, clouded by sleepiness, combined with his messy hair was absolutely adorable.

He stretched slightly before speaking, his voice coming out quiet and groggy sounding. "Morning."

"Morning." She said, her own lips turning up just at the sight of him smiling. "Are you hungry? My mom left us some breakfast that I can heat up."

His eyebrows twitched towards each other, "She's not here?"

"She went to work." She told him, recapping what her mother had said to her before she left the house as they got up and headed towards the kitchen. Standing at the counter she put four frozen

waffles into the toaster with Mike standing right next to her. Jane reached up and pushed his hair back, "I like your hair when it's messy." She said

Mike glared at her half heartedly. He then reached behind her head, hooking his finger in her hair tie and pulling it out with one yank. "Yours looks better messy."

She smoothed her hair down with one hand, trying to grab her hair tie back with the other. He quickly slipped it on his wrist and put it behind his back. "You have the advantage of having straight hair, it's not fair."

"Straight hair is boring." He said, catching her hand as she tried to reach around him and lacing his fingers with hers. "I love your curly hair."

Jane gave up on trying to get her hair tie back, taking out the now-warm Eggos and putting them on a plate before replacing them with four more. Once they each had a stack in front of them they sat down at the kitchen table, Jane at the head and Mike next to her. "Your mom is so cool." He told her as he cut up his food, "I can't think of any other mother who would agree to their kid being home alone twice in 24 hours, let them stay home from school, *and* having their daughters boyfriend sleepover."

She felt her cheeks start to go warm when he called himself her boyfriend, just like she did every time he reference their relationship so casually. "Your mom agreed to it." She pointed out.

"Yeah, only because your mom asked her. If I did it would have been a 'no'." He said, "I'm starting to think your mom is some sort of witch who can make people do whatever they want just by asking really nicely."

She grinned, remembering when she made her mom dress up for halloween when she was six. Jane had been a black cat and her mom had been a witch. "So since my mom is a witch, am I a witch too?"

"Definitely." He said starting to smile again.

After they finished eating they both brushed their teeth and silently agreed to stay in their pajamas. Since they couldn't leave the house there was no point in getting dressed. Mike asked to borrow a hairbrush, since he'd left his at home, and Jane reluctantly agreed. She couldn't help but feel slightly disappointed that all of the strands out of place were quickly smoothed down. He seemed equally upset when she brushed her own hair.

They watched television on the couch, still pulled out. Every so often Mike would ask her a different variation of 'are you okay?'. She directed the question right back to him each time. Jane was just as worried about him as he was about her. The phone rang just as the morning news was wrapping up. Fully remembering one of her moms few rules Jane got to her feet and darted towards the kitchen so she wouldn't miss the call.

"Hello?" She said, trying not to pant once she picked up the phone.

"Oh, cool, you don't have school either." The familiar voice of her friend Kelly said on the other line. "Why don't you have school?"

"My mom let me stay home." She answered simply, "Why don't *you* have school?"

"There was a storm two days ago and a bunch of trees fell down. One of them landed on the school so we get to have a few days off while they make some repairs."

Jane's eyebrows went high on her forehead. "Wow."

"I know." Kelly said. Jane could practically see her friend sitting at her desk with her feet propped up as they talked, the way she always did when she was on the phone. "We haven't talked in like a week, and I wanted to check in. How is everything?"

The single most loaded question someone could have asked her. Of course it came from Kelly, who she hadn't even told about her dad getting out of jail the first time. "Kinda crazy."

"How's that boy?" Kelly asked. Jane could hear the hopeful excitement in her voice. "What's his name again?"

"Mike." She told her. "He's good. He's here right now."

"Is your mom there?"

"... no."

She heard her friend let out an excited squeal. This was, by far, the juiciest experience Jane had ever told Kelly about in their five years of friendship. "Oh my god, how'd you pull *that* off?"

"Extenuating circumstances." Jane said, then gave her a very brief summary of what had happened. She mentioned only her dad getting out of jail once, and only said that he came over and was yelling at her on the front porch. In order to spare her friend of having to worry about her she said that the door had been locked so he couldn't get in. While she told the story Mike came in, leaning on the wall on the other side of the phone. He was clearly confused as to why she was telling such an edited story but stayed quiet. "So, yeah." Jane said when she finally finished, "Things are kinda crazy."

There was a beat or two of silence before her friend spoke up again. "Holy *shit* Jane." She said, letting out a sigh. "And he was there with you?"

"Yeah."

"How did he take everything?"

Jane smiled at Mike, and he quickly did the same to her. "Really well, considering." She said. "He's really supportive and understanding of everything and just... he's great."

She watched his face start to turn pink while she clearly talked about him.

"I was thinking of coming down to visit some time." Kelly told her. "Promise when I do you'll introduce me to *Mike*." Her voice turned dreamy when she said his name, likely trying to do an impression of Jane

"Of course."

Shortly after they bid their goodbyes, Jane once again promising her friend she would introduce her, and hung up the phone. She was surprised Kelly wasn't getting in her car to drive down that very moment after being promised she would meet Mike. But Jane was thankful none the less that she would get to spend a good portion of the day alone with Mike. Since they had finished all of their school work the day before they could do almost anything they wanted, as long as they stayed inside.

Back in the living room they returned to their spots on the pull out couch and looked back at the television. She watched a report about how kids who listened to music with headphones too loud were likely to experience hearing damage later in life. Jane seriously doubted the story would cause any kid to turn the volume down. As the woman on screen wrapped up and started to transition into another report Jane could feel Mike looking at her. Sure enough when she turned towards him he was watching her.

"What?" She asked, starting to smile again

"You look cute." He said simply

Jane smiled even wider, closing the distance between them and pressing her lips against his. One of his hands quickly got lost in her hair as he kissed her back. She could feel him wrapping one of her curls around his finger and was suddenly glad he had never given her hair tie back. Her heart started to beat faster and faster the longer they kissed, remembering how they had the day before.

It didn't surprise her that, due to her lack of dating experience, she had never thought much about making out with boys before. That is until she actually did it. As soon as the threat of her father's presence subsided, and the police left, it was all she could think about. In his room when he packed his things, sitting on the couch next to him all night, laying so close to him while she struggled to stay awake. She couldn't get the memory of the way she had felt out of her head. It was just one of the many things she had never experienced before meeting Mike. And it was a feeling she wanted again.

She kissed him harder, his lips parting ever so slightly as she did. Under her hands, placed on his cheeks, she could feel his face heating

up. Jane hoped he wasn't able to feel hers do the same. With his arm wrapped around her waist he pulled her closer to him, though she couldn't get much closer anyway. Still it wasn't close enough. She didn't want there to be an inch of separation between them.

Jane leaned closer and closer to him until she was practically pushing him onto his back. He pulled her down with him, their lips never separating. She propped herself up on her elbows so the space between them was minimal. His hands were now placed on her hips, a few of his fingertips slipped underneath the hem of her shirt. Whether he'd done so on purpose or by accident she wasn't sure of, but she didn't particularly care. The feeling of his hands on her bare skin sent a shiver up her spine.

She moved so her knees were on either side of his waist, her shirt sliding up a bit more. Her heart started beating even faster still as he kissed her harder. Jane could even feel her pulse in her brain which gave her a bit of a headache. But not a bad one. Her mind seemed void of all thought that didn't relate to Mike. Mike's hands on her back, his tongue touching hers. She couldn't think of anything else, and she didn't *want* to think of anything else.

He sat up, Jane still sitting on his lap. His lips left hers and trailed up her jaw. Jane's hands ran through his hair, his still gripping her waist. She felt as if every inch of her skin was on fire it was so hot. She couldn't help but be a little worried that she would spontaneously combust at any second. There was no longer an inch of space between them, allowing her to feel that his skin was almost as warm as hers.

Jane wrapped her fingers around the hem of his T-shirt. Reading her mind, in a way only he could, he pulled away from her long enough to pull it over his head. His lips immediately found hers again. She could feel his heart pounding in his chest just as fast as hers was. Just as she reached towards the hem of her own shirt Mike pulled away from her, grabbing her hand and stopping her. His face was as red as hers felt.

A small frown appeared on her face, her eyes darting back and forth between his. "What's wrong?" She asked, her brows pulling together

"I just..." His voice trailed off, panting just enough for her to notice. She couldn't help but wonder if his brain felt just as clouded as hers was. "Do you really want to do this?"

She stared at him. Her heart was now pounding out of nervousness. "You don't?"

"No, *no*, it's not that." He said immediately. "It's just that things have been really crazy recently and I don't want you to regret anything."

Jane was even more confused than she had been before he offered any sort of explanation. "You think I'm going to regret anything having to do with you?" She asked skeptically, "Not likely."

"This is a really big deal, Jane." He told her, suddenly sounding serious

She sighed, leaning her head back. Why did he always have to be right? It was probably the only annoying thing about him. Picking her head back up and looking at him once more she found him staring at her with lust-clouded eyes. How he managed to think rationally and objectively in the middle of making out was a mystery. Jane's mind was only just starting to clear because they had separated. "Fine." She said simply, making it clear in her tone she agreed but wasn't thrilled.

He kissed her, a quick peck before he wrapped his arms around her waist again. She rested her head in the crook of his neck. The only sound was their breathing and the television across the room. Mike took his shirt, only holding it for a matter of seconds before Jane grabbed it out of his hands and tossed it to the end of the pull out couch. Just because they weren't going to do anything more didn't mean she couldn't take advantage of the fact that his shirt was already off. He laughed and held her tighter against his chest while her face broke out into a grin.

They sat together and watched movies until lunch, Mike putting his shirt on when she left to go to the bathroom. Once noon rolled around Jane searched her kitchen for something to eat. The only lunch-type food she found were meat and bread for sandwiches. She desperately wished they could go out and get something but didn't

even bother mentioning it. Her mom was being extremely lenient with them and she had no intention to break any of the rules that had been set. Except for the no food on the couch-only snacks rule.

With plates in their laps they watched soap operas. The only thing that was on during midday for housewives. Jane looked at him halfway through her sandwich, her mind once again replaying everything that had happened. She wished she could go back in time and tell Mike that she would be okay by herself and that he could go home. The guilt that it was her fault he had been there was still eating away at her. She knew he had been trying to be brave for her, which made her heart swell with gratitude.

"Do you know how amazing you are?" She asked him after the title sequence for *Days of Our Lives* played the fourth time that day.

He looked over at her, confusion written clearly on his face. "What?"

"I feel like my mind made you up. You're too good to be true." As if to prove her point she reached out and pinched his arm

"I'm real." He said, taking his arm back. "Where's this coming from?"

She shrugged, watching Josh Taylor deliver a dramatic yet horribly done monologue. "I don't know. It's just..." Jane sighed, setting her plate aside and turning towards him. "Last night was really scary, and you held it together so well."

"So did you."

"Yeah, but I knew what was coming." She said. "You've never had to deal with anything like that before. I can't even imagine what it's like to be in that kind of situation when you never have before." Mike stayed quiet, his eyes fixed down on the plate in his lap. She desperately wished she could read his mind and hear what it was that he was holding back. Jane wanted to hug him and never let go. She wanted to take away whatever pain had been caused by her father's arrival, even if it meant adding it onto her own. She could handle it. She'd been handling it for years. Mike had never had to carry something like this around before. "And you stayed with me, and had to listen to everything we told the police. Do you really know how

much that meant to me?"

He looked at her again, "I would never have left you after that."

"And then everything that happened the first time he showed up." She continued. "How you totally dropped everything and came to help me even though you had no idea what was going on. And you stayed with me then too." Jane reached for his hand, linking her fingers between his. "I really meant it when I told you I love you. It wasn't just because I was scared."

Mike squeezed her hand gently, "I meant it too."

She smiled at him, her stomach doing a backflip. For a fleeting moment she had wondered if he would have responded the same if they had been under different circumstances. It was certainly a relief to hear he truly meant what he said. "Do the guys know anything about my dad?"

"Sort of." He said. "I had to tell them something when I asked Dustin to cover for me when we stayed at Lizzie's."

"What did you say?"

"I told them that you and your dad got in a really bad fight and that he stormed out and you asked me to come over." He told her. "They pretty much gave up on asking me questions because I never answered any of them."

Jane nodded a few times. "You can tell them tomorrow." She said

"Really?"

She knew she couldn't keep it a secret forever. And if they were anything like Mike she knew she could trust them. "Yeah. I think it's time." Jane would also have to fill both Max and Lizzie in on why she and Mike hadn't shown up to school that day. If she didn't get the chance to see them in the morning it would be inconvenient to tell her at lunch when half the people at the table had no idea what was going on.

xXx

Jane's mom sat in the car while she and Mike walked up to his house. The sun was close to setting and he couldn't stay forever. There was a heaviness that had settled over her on the ride there. Being near Mike was instantly comforting, what was she going to without him? As they approached his front door their hands held on tightly to one another they both hesitated once they stood on the doorstep.

He turned to her before he went inside. "Promise me you'll call me if anything happens or if you even need to talk? I'll tell my family to stay off the line just in case."

"You don't have to do that."

"I'm still going to." He told her, letting his bag slide off his shoulder and land on the ground. "Promise you'll call if you need to."

She squeezed his hand to reassure him. "I promise."

Mike wrapped his arms around her, his forehead pressed against her neck. "Even if it's 3 am you can still call."

Jane laughed, her arms tightly wrapped around her waist. "I can promise you I'll be asleep by then."

They stood in silence, both reluctant to let go. She hoped her mom would continue her streak of patience. Jane was in no way ready to say goodbye to him, even if they would be seeing each other again in a little over twelve hours. She loved him more than she thought she could love someone. He, with no hesitation, was unconditionally supportive of her. Mike was too good for the ugly world they lived in, and she felt like she had to protect him at all costs.

"I don't want to say goodbye to you." He said, reading her mind yet again.

"I'm going to see you in thirteen hours." She told him. "And you can call me too."

Mike pulled away, putting his hands on her shoulders. "I love you."

"I love you too."

She kissed him despite the fact that her mom was almost definitely watching them. It was dangerous how attached she had gotten to him in such a short time. The fact that she could hardly stand to even say goodbye to him was exactly the kind of thing her mom would have warned her about had she given her the 'moving too fast' lecture. Yes, they were moving fast. Just fast enough to keep up with the craziness that their lives was throwing at them. At any moment Jane could trip and fall. Which would have been scary if Mike wasn't there to pick her up.

Reluctantly they separated before Mike turned towards his house. Once the door closed behind him she practically had to run back to her mom's car so she wouldn't follow him inside. As her mom pulled out of the driveway Jane could feel a sense of dread settling in her stomach but she pushed it down. She reminded herself that she would see him in the morning and that he wouldn't disappear overnight.

26. Chapter 26: Mike

you guys seemed to really like those smut scenes so I added one in at the last minute, hence why this chapter is so damn long lol

The second Mike's foot touched the bottom stair his mother's voice traveled from down the hall. "Not so fast, Michael." With a sigh he dropped his overnight bag onto the floor and made his way into the kitchen where his mom sat at the table waiting for him. She pushed the chair next to her out when he finally walked in, a silent indicator they were about to have a long talk. "How long have you known about Jane's father?" She asked him once he sat down

"Two weeks." He said, "Ever since he got out of jail upstate and came to her house the first time."

She sat with this for a few moments. Mike had a feeling she'd been struggling to digest everything she'd learned about her sons girlfriend every since he called her the night before. He wondered what exactly Terry had told her while he and Jane had been upstairs. "And... what exactly happened last night?"

"I took her home and she told me that her mom wanted me to stay with her until she came home so Jane wouldn't be alone." He started. "She was showing me the pictures on the wall from when she was younger, when we heard a car door outside. She looked out the window and it was her dad."

From there he told her how they hid in her room and blocked the door. He recapped her phone call with the police and everything her father yelled through the door. Mike told his mom how scared he had been when Jane told her father 'no' and how he exploded when she did. He finished with when he listened to the police interview with Jane and her mom and hearing everything they'd been through. The whole time he spoke he could see his mom choking up and trying to hold herself together. Mike had spent every moment since the police left pretending everything was okay, following in Jane's footsteps. But as he retold everything he felt a lump form in his throat.

Once he was done she reached out and grabbed his hand. He made no attempt to pull away. "That must have been terrifying." She said

"She kept trying to make me feel better by saying she could handle it, that she was used to it." Mike felt his bottom lip start to tremble. He hardly tried to hold it back, to suppress the feelings that had been eating away at him and begging to break free. "But it just made me feel worse, because I couldn't stop thinking about how much she has had to go through that she could handle something like that."

The hand that wasn't holding onto his started to rub his back. His mother wore an expression of sympathy that only got stronger at the sight of how upset he was. In a way that only mothers could so easily read their kids she could tell he wasn't quite done, so she stayed quiet while she waited for him to continue and attempted to offer some sort of comfort.

"And I'm just so angry because she doesn't deserve any of this. She's most amazing, and the nicest, person I've ever met. And shit just keeps happening to her." If he weren't so shaken up he knew for a fact he would get scolded for cursing. "She says it doesn't bother her, but it bothers me.

"And she moved here to get away from people like her father. They wanted to just start fresh. Then Troy starts picking on her just like people in her old school used to. And the person who they moved to hide from gets a Get Out of Jail Free Card and hunts them down. If we hadn't gotten into her room and locked the door..." his throat burned more and more until he stopped trying all together. It took only a matter of seconds before the tears he tried to hold back rolled down his cheeks. "She said he would have killed her."

Karen moved her chair closer to her distraught son, wrapping an arm around his shoulder. Like every teenage boy he had distanced himself from her the second he started his first growth spurt. She had tried so hard to keep a close connection with him yet felt as if he was slipping through her fingers. As happy as she was that he was willingly opening up to her her heart ached to see him in such pain.

"What if I'm not there to protect her next time something happens?" He asked, resting his head on her shoulder. His voice now started to

crack as he let himself cry. "Or what if I'm not enough to protect her?"

She continued to rub his back, the same spiral design she used to when he was young. "Do you know what her mom told me last night?" She asked. "She told me about how you and her friends snuck her out of her house when her dad came, the night you told me you were staying at Dustin's." Mike's stomach dropped slightly at the fact that she knew he lied. But she didn't seem at all upset. "You know what Jane told her when she got home?"

"What?"

"Jane told her that she had never felt better so quickly after something happened with her father. She said she feels safe around you." His mom told him. "You don't have to stand up to people like her father or Troy to make her feel safe. Jane can hold her own just fine. What she needs is someone to be there for her."

Mike picked his head up, his eyes searching her face for any sign she made it up just to make him feel better. "She said that?"

Karen nodded, a small smile appearing on her face. "Yeah, she did." She said. "And I bet it meant the world to Jane that you were there with her through everything." She reached up and wiped his tears away with her thumbs. "You really like her, don't you?"

"I love her."

She continued to smile, in no way surprised. Had he told her two days earlier she would have written it off as a child who didn't properly understand the weight of the word 'love'. Her first clue that it wasn't the case was watching the two of them at dinner. In the short time they'd been together they were so comfortable with one another. Mike had looked at her in a way Karen had never seen him look at anyone. After hearing what they had just been through, and seeing just how much it hurt him to see her experience something so traumatic, she didn't for a second doubt his words.

"You know you can talk to me, Mike." She told him. "I don't want you to feel like you have to keep things like this from me. Jane is a

wonderful young lady, and if something is going on with her I want you to be able to tell me."

'Wait till I tell Jane' he thought to himself the second his mom called her a wonderful young lady. She had been so worried about getting his parents approval and making a good first impression Mike had a feeling it would come as a relief to hear how much his mom liked her already. He stayed in the kitchen a few more minutes as he calmed down before he went upstairs.

Mike jumped in the shower, sneaking into Nancy's room beforehand and bringing her radio into the bathroom with him. The idea of being totally alone in completely silence, the perfect setting for his mind to run wild, was terrifying. He hardly even cared the station was playing pop hits he hardly knew the words too. It was noise. Something to focus on. To keep his thoughts from wandering into what had happened 24 hours earlier he instead wondered if each song was one Jane would like or not.

After getting out of the bathroom and putting Nancy's radio back in her room he put his headphones on and turned on his walkman. He crawled into bed early, pulling the covers up to his chin. The feeling of laying down with headphones on was not a pleasant one but he would gladly take it over deafening silence. Mike lay on his side, starrng at the empty space in his bed next to him. As he closed his eyes he pictured Jane laying beside him, curls free from the confines of her hair tie, sleeping soundly.

xXx

"Mike?!"

He picked his gaze up to find all three of his friends starrng at him. Since the moment he woke up that morning he'd been in somewhat of a daze, as if his mind was shut off and his body was running on autopilot. The only clear thought that was in his mind was *is Jane okay? Where is she?* He had hoped this feeling would have subsided quickly. Yet he felt exactly the same as he sat in homeroom.

"Are you sure you're still not sick?" Lucas asked referring to his absence the day before

Mike shifted in his seat. Jane's voice telling him he could let them in on what had happened echoed in his head. "I wasn't sick." He said simply, as if it was enough of an answer

The three boys exchanged confused glances, checking that they all knew just as much as the other; nothing. "What do you mean?" Will asked, "Where were you yesterday, then?"

"Something happened with Jane." He told them, his gaze falling back down to his hands on his desk. "That thing I told you about her dad two weeks ago was kind of a lie."

Mike started with how he called Max, worried about Jane after she never showed up for school. He could tell they fully grasped how serious what he was telling them by their silence when he told them he spent the night with three girls. He then moved on to what Jane told him when he dropped her off at her house two days earlier, skipping over what Troy had said entirely. She had almost been too embarrassed to tell him about it. He figured it was one thing she wasn't okay with him saying. As he told them about her dad trying to get into her room, only quoting a few things he said, Mike was thankful he wasn't getting teared up like when he told his mom. When he got to the part about the police interview he said as little detail as possible about what her and her mom said about the past abuse.

Once he was done they had only enough time to process everything he said and for Dustin to say "holy shit" before the classroom door opened. Perfectly on cue Jane walked in, wearing the sweater he had purposely left at her house the day before. She stopped in her tracks when she saw all the boys starring at her. When she reached them she dropped her bag but stayed standing. "You told them?" She guessed

"Yeah."

Jane turned her desk around so it faced the four of them, sitting down and resting her elbows on the top. "Thanks for the present." She said, pulling the sleeves of the sweatshirt over her hands.

Before he could respond Dustin pointed a finger at them. "Are you

guys for real? Cause if you're making this up that's really messed up."

The smallest hint of a smile appeared on her face. "It's true."

"Holy shit." Lucas said, shaking his head. "That's some heavy stuff."

Jane shrugged, leaning back in her chair. "Shit happens."

While there was no simple way to describe enduring years of abuse Mike knew for a fact 'shit happens' was, in no way, able to communicate what she had been through. But it was her defense tactic. She belittled the situation, convincing both herself and everyone around her, that everything was fine. He doubted the others could see the pain in her eyes even as she dismissed her experience with "shit happens". But he could see it clear as day.

"Are you okay?" Will asked her

"I'm just glad it's over now." She answered, then nudged Mike's foot with her own. "It helped that I wasn't alone."

As they grinned at one another he was vaguely aware of Dustin mock-gagging behind him. "You guys are disgusting." He then declared. Jane simply flipped him off before asking what they had missed during their absence. Expertly shifting the topic of conversation away from herself.

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Their English teacher finished reading the chapter of *Catcher in the Rye* with five minutes of class left. Mike tried to ignore the blush that rose to his cheeks as Holden's encounter with a prostitute was read aloud to the class. Before realizing that nothing was going to happen between the two characters he was concerned he was about to be permanently scarred. Setting the book down on his desk the teacher told them to discuss with the person next to them what they think was going to happen in the next chapter.

"I really have no idea what's going to happen next." Jane said so seriously he wouldn't have known it was a joke if she hadn't described the whole book in detail to him.

"I think he's going to call Jane." Mike told her just as serious as she had been. "That's what I would do."

She rolled her eyes at him but smiled none the less. "I was named after her, you know." She told him as she put her books away

"Really?"

"Yup." She said. "My mom picked it. Said that Jane was the only one with pure intentions in the whole book." She looked back over at him. "But she only told me last year when I read it in school."

He raised an eyebrow at her, "How come she never told you?"

"Jane's dad was a jerk. So is mine. Just two very different types." Mike was infinitely thankful Jane's dad was nothing like Jane Gallagher's step father. "She felt bad that I ended up being a little too similar to her."

Mike wanted to hug her tight. Since they were in the middle of a classroom he instead settled for holding her hand. "Well, she's right. Jane's literally the only good one in the book."

"They're all good." She corrected, "But she's the only one who's not a phony."

The two of them went back and forth making wildly incorrect predictions for what would happen next in the book, each of them trying to make the other laugh. By the time the bell rang they were still laughing over Jane's 'prediction' that halfway through the book was going to turn into a sci-fi novel and that Dianetics by L. Ron Hubbard was actually the sequel. They laughed so hard that they had to cover their mouths to muffle the sound. As they walked out of the classroom a few of the other students in the class were still giving them looks.

Once they entered the hallway Jane linked her arm with his the same way she now almost always did when they walked together. After the craziness they'd experienced over the past few days it felt good to be in school making stupid jokes and pretending like nothing had happened. Mike was beginning to understand why she always put up

such a front like everything was okay.

On the way to Jane's next class, Mike still by her side, he spotted Troy at his locker down the hall. The bruise on his nose was a quarter the size it had been and had turned an ugly yellow-brown color. When he shut his locker his eyes landed on him and Jane approaching. It was only a matter of time before they crossed paths. Mike watched him cross to the other side of the hallway and head to his class.

"Did you just see that?" He asked, looking down at Jane

He could see her trying to hold back a smile, biting down on her bottom lip. "See what?" She asked. Though he was sure she knew exactly what he was talking about

xXx

"Where is she?" Max grumbled impatiently, her leg bouncing up and down underneath the table

Dustin, not nearly as worried as she was, muttered a half hearted reply. "She's probably just asking her teacher a question."

Mike glanced at the empty seat between him and Max before looking back up at her again. "Everything's fine." He told her, sounding exactly like the girl they were referring to. "It's probably nothing."

She didn't look entirely convinced. When she came into lunch she stormed over to Mike, repeating what Lizzie had told her that morning and asking if it had been true. Apparently she had come to school late and hadn't been able to hear about what happened from Jane directly, instead hearing it from Lizzie. Max instantly became antsy for her friends arrival when he said that she'd only been told some of the story. He filled her in on what Lizzie had left out. Her eyes went wide when he got into more detail.

"You were *there*?" She asked in disbelief

"Yeah."

Max shook her head a few times. "Lizzie told me she was going to let

Jane tell me most of it, but I had no idea how much other stuff there was." Silence fell over the table. As shocked as she was the hear the extent of what happened Mike imagined the three guys had been way more surprised. They had no idea about anything having to do with Jane's father. "What was it like?" She asked

All four pairs of eyes on the table fell on him. His friends hadn't gotten the chance to ask him anything before Jane came in, the conversation quickly shifting once she did. With one look at their faces he could tell there were questions they'd been sitting with since homeroom. Normally he would have held back the detail of being scared so he wouldn't get teased. But Mike was sure this was one situation he wouldn't be teased for. "It was... really terrifying." They continued to stare at him silently asking him to continue

"I knew he was scary from what she told me about him, but hearing a story about him and actually being there are so different." He told them, his eyes falling down to the tray in front of him. "And he was saying really terrible things to her, threatening her and calling her names."

"Like what?" Will asked from across the table

Mike hesitated. The one time he'd repeated what her father said to her was the night before when he had talked to his mom. The words had left a bad taste in his mouth long after he brushed his teeth later on. "He was calling her a slut because she had a boy in her room. Telling her he was going to make her regret moving away from him. Stuff like that."

He could hear a few of them let out quiet yet frustrated sighs. Mike's appetite was instantly spoiled and he pushed his lunch tray away from him. Before he could say any more Max looked across the cafeteria. "She's coming." She said

Looking up and behind him he was instantly relieved to see Jane making her way towards them. Her face broke into a smile at the sight of her friends. She dropped her bag on the floor before taking her seat next to Mike. Her eyes drifted down to his pushed away lunch then met his with a worried look. "What's wrong?" She asked instantly

"I'm just not hungry." He told her. Mike pushed the tray towards her. "You can have the rest if you want."

She eyed him skeptically for a few seconds before she took his food and set it in front of her. "Did you tell them about Troy?"

"What about Troy?" Max immediately asked, worry crossing over her face.

While Jane told them about how he had went out of his way to avoid them everyone seemed to silently agree not to mention what they'd been talking about before she arrived. The satisfied grin on her face as she told them his bruise had yet to fully fade was enough to discourage them from bringing up anything to dampen her mood. Lucas suggested she hit him again when his bruise did vanish, to which she replied "if he deserves it I might."

For the rest of the lunch period Mike marveled at how well she was able to push everything that had happened aside and joke around with her friends so soon after. It helped to ease his own nerves and caused him to worry about her a bit less. By the time the lunch period ended they were laughing so hard Mike was able to almost completely put the voice of her father out of his head.

xXx

When the day ended Mike headed for the front entrance between Will and Jane, both of whom he was giving a ride home. At the double doors leading outside Jennifer Hayes and Stacey Shapiro stood with a stack of flyers, handing them out to everyone who passed. As they got closer he could hear them encouraging students to go to prom, even handing a few flyers to freshman. Once they were close Stacey handed a flyer to Jane and told her "too bad you're not a senior, punching Troy Harrington could have made you prom queen." Jane starred at her for a moment before letting out a quick 'thanks' before following Mike and Will out of the doors.

"Wow." Will said, looking up from his own flyer. "Did Stacey Shapiro just tell you you could have been prom queen?"

"Yeah." Jane replied, still looking down at the paper in her hand. "She

did." But instead of looking flattered she looked confused. "Whatever." She said after a moment, shoving the flyer into her backpack. "She was just trying to be nice. Not like she meant it."

"Why wouldn't she?"

Jane looked at Mike like she expected him to be kidding. "Because girls like Stacey and Jennifer are prom queens. Not girls like me."

Will's eyebrows pulled together. "Why not?"

"Just because." She said simply

Jane, like before, easily shifted the conversation to other topics as they all climbed into Mike's car. Will commented on the station she out on, the same one both of them always did. They chatted about different bands and albums while Mike simply listened and enjoyed that they were getting along so well. For the majority of the ride they debated which Van Halen album was the best, each of them convinced their choice was the better one. Mike, having nothing to contribute since he didn't know either album, stayed quiet for the majority of the conversation. Pulling in front of Will's house they decided to agree to disagree before Will got out and waved goodbye as he walked up to his front door.

"I like your friends." She told him as Will's house disappeared from sight. "I'm glad I'm getting to know them."

"Me too."

When he parked in front of Jane's house he spotted the empty driveway. He suddenly had déjà vu to only a few days before. A lump settled in Mike's throat as he remembered how quickly the last time they'd been in this situation had been ruined. Jane followed his gaze to the driveway before she looked back at him. Her expression was now one of uncertainty.

"Do you want me to wait for your mom to get home with you?" She nodded silently and grabbed her backpack off the floor of his car. Mike quickly followed her up the walkway to her front porch. Jane pulled her keys out of her pocket and unlocked the door. Once it was

open she hesitated to walk in, her eyes scanning the living room several times. He put his hand on her back. "Hey, it's okay." He told her. "There's no one in there."

"Yeah, right." She said, shaking her head and walking through the doorway. "Sorry."

Mike's stomach churned at the realization that she no longer felt safe in her own home. He could see it in her eyes as she tried to search the room without him noticing. While he didn't mention it he definitely noticed. He tried not to wonder how she had been dealing with being at home over the past couple of days and pushed the image of her having sleepless nights out of his head. For what must have been the hundredth time he wished he could have done more to make her feel better. Jane locked the front door, then tried turning the doorknob just to make sure it wouldn't open. She then looked up at him with a smile he wasn't fully convinced was genuine. "Do you wanna go upstairs?"

"Sure."

He held onto her hand as she started up the stairs. Though he wouldn't admit it he too was nervous. The last time they'd gone up her staircase together they were practically running for their lives. Once they were in her room she closed the door. It was a relief that they didn't have to barricade themselves inside. With the door closed Jane turned towards him and laced her fingers between his. "Thanks." She told him. Though it came out of nowhere and she offered no elaboration he knew exactly what she was referring to.

He kissed her forehead. "Your welcome." Mike said. "And you know, Stacey is right. You could be prom queen."

Jane rolled her eyes and leaned her head back. She let out a short groan before she responded. "No I couldn't."

"Yes you could."

She looked back up at him. "You only think that because you love me."

"Absolutely true." He said, pulling her towards him. "But Will thought so too. So did Stacey. They're not in love with you."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "How do you know? Maybe Stacey's secretly a lesbian." The corners of her lips twitched upwards at what was clearly a joke.

"Jane." He said seriously. "Why do you find the idea so hard to believe?"

Her eyes landed on the floor where they remained while she the gears in her head turned as she thought of a response. "I'm not girly like them, I'm a tomboy."

"So?"

Jane looked back up at him. "Tomboys don't win prom queen. Pretty girls do."

Mike could feel his heart cracking inside his chest. Not just from her response but from the look on her face. Her eyes, showing just a hint of sadness, couldn't quite meet his. Her bottom lip stuck out ever so slightly. What he saw in her face was the product of what he had a feeling was years worth of bullying. He wished he could reach into her brain and take out every memory of anyone telling her anything other than the fact that she was an amazing person. "Jane, what are you talking about? You're beautiful."

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't."

Her hands let go of his before wrapping around his neck. "I don't know, Mike. That's just the way things work."

He could tell clear as day that she wanted to drop the topic. Mike put his hands on her waist. "Fine." He said. "Will you settle for being my prom queen?"

"That was so cheesy." She said. Yet she now wore a bright smile on her face, a dead giveaway that her teasing was only half hearted.

Jane stood on her toes and pressed her lips against his. He felt as if every time she kissed him her vibrancy was at full saturation. She was a being incomparable to all others. Mike was still baffled that he had been so lucky to become to object of her affection. Jane was the sun, the moon, and every star in the sky. In comparison he felt like space debris. Yet she had somehow managed to fall in love with him anyway.

Every move she made was magic. The way her lips kissed his or how her fingertips gently brushed across his skin as she moved her hands from the back of his neck to his chest. Her palm landed perfectly over his now pounding heart. Despite how many times they had kissed before he still found himself going light headed every time she stood on her toes to reach him. Though he no longer struggled to believe that she did want him he was still baffled by the fact.

Her fingers wrapped around the collar of his shirt before she started walking backwards toward her bed. They moved just as clumsily as they had when they had struggled to walk to her couch while kissing. She stopped abruptly when the back of her legs hit her bed. Jane moved her hands to his shoulders and pushed him down until he was sitting. They were only separated for a matter of seconds, until she sat on his lap.

"Are you gonna give me another lecture about moving to fast?" She asked him. Her eyebrow climbed high on her forehead while he hands found he back of his neck again.

"No."

His voice came out strained and shaky, which he guess she noticed by the smile that appeared on her face. "Good."

Her lips met his once again. His arms were wrapped around her waist to keep her from falling off. The feeling of Jane sitting in his lap, with almost zero separation between them, could have easily been one of his favorite feelings in the world. He couldn't imagine how it could get better. That is until she started running her finger through his hair.

Mike's heart sank slightly when she pulled away from him. Her hands

left his hair and grabbed the zipper of her sweatshirt. Jane looked at him and grinned at whatever shocked expression he wore. "Would you relax? I'm wearing a shirt underneath."

"I'm relaxed." He insisted. She rolled her eyes at him and unzipped her sweatshirt. Jane shrugged it off and tossed it on the floor, now only wearing a tank top. "You said you were wearing a shirt."

"I am."

"No, you're wearing a tank top."

"Same thing."

"Absolutely *not* the same thing."

"It's the same thing."

Jane kissed him again before he could continue to protest. Her arms wrapped back around his neck, keeping his body tightly pressed against hers. Mike took her bottom lip between his teeth as gently as he could. A small moan quickly escaped from her throat. The sound alone was enough to make every cell in his body feel as if it would overheat and explode any second.

Mike felt like an idiot for stopping her before despite the fact it might have been the right thing to do. He had instantly regretted it when he saw the disappointed look on her face followed by her voicing her doubts that he didn't want her. He *absolutely* did. She was the most perfect thing on the face of the world. Probably in the entire universe. His mind could hardly wrap around how perfect she was. He didn't have the capacity to imagine something better than her. How could he not want her?

His lips separated from hers before trailing across her jaw. She tilted her head back so he would have better access. Her skin felt warm against his lips but not quite as hot as his was. Jane was a masterpiece hand crafted by a master artist, there was not a doubt in his mind. She was dangerously addicting. More than any drug. When his name escaped her lips, the perfect combination of a whisper and moan, he vowed to never go to rehab.

Instead of tugging at the hem of his shirt as a silent request she grabbed and pulled it up until she had to separate once more to get it over his head. With his shirt now discarded at the foot of her bed he looked up at her. For once her head was taller than his. Her brown eyes were clouded with the same want and lust that he was sure was in his own. He kissed her neck while her fingers trailed down his now bare back.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

With her arms locked around his neck Jane moved off his lap and lay down on her back, bringing him with her. Remembering how she pulled him closer the last time they were in the same position he propped himself up on his elbows. Underneath him he could feel he moving. He had no clue what she was doing until she pulled her tank top over her head. Mike did his best not to stare at her but failed miserably. She was perfect, which he already knew. But still.

Her expression suddenly turned nervous. "Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"I didn't shave my legs."

"I don't care."

She bit down on her bottom lip, not entirely convinced by his response.

"It's been a little while."

"So? I've never shaved my legs ever."

"Yeah but you're a boy."

"Jane I really don't care."

"Okay sorry."

Mike leaned down and kissed her again. He loved how her fingernails

lightly grazed his skin when she touched him. He loved that she had become more bold and forward than she had once been. He loved her. And when her tongue rubbed against his in a certain way he was suddenly sure he knew the meaning of life. Adults had told him for years that the point of growing up was for one to discover themselves. Meeting Jane was a breakthrough of a discovery. She was another part of him, like the magnetic friendship necklaces girls used to wear in middle school. Once they were together it wasn't easy for them to be apart. He felt as if he was no longer just Mike. He was one half of Mike and Jane.

He was never certain of the legitimacy of soulmates. The term wasn't one that sat with him well. But as Jane's hands traveled along his skin and she moaned into his mouth he remembered a myth he had heard in school when he was younger. Zeus, king of the gods, what been threatened by the power of the human race and split everyone into two different people. The only way the human race would stand a chance in a fight with a god was if they found their other half. Mike was certain his lay beneath him. With Jane he felt as if he could conquer the world.

The sound of a car door interrupted his thoughts like the needle being taken off of a record. She hardly had the opportunity to push him off of her before he did so himself. Jane knelt on her bed and looked out the window, then scrambled for her tank top that had fallen on the floor.

"*Shit.*" She hissed while she pulled it over her head. "My mom's home." Mike had already grabbed his own shirt and started to turn it from being inside out. After pulling it back on he grabbed her sweatshirt off the floor and handed it to her. "I'm sorry." She told him

Even from up in her room he could hear the front door open and shut, a sound quickly followed by her moms voice calling from the bottom of the stairs. "Jane?"

"Yeah?" She called back, zipping her sweatshirt back up.

"Is Mike here?"

Her eyes landed on him. "Yeah, we were waiting for you to come

back."

"Okay."

When her moms footsteps fade away Jane let out a groan and leaned back down onto her bed. "God, is this gonna happen every time?" She asked. Her cheeks were still red from the increased blood flow and her lips swollen from repeated kisses. She looked at him with an expression he wished she wore more.

Mike lay on his back next to her. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, the adrenaline from her mothers sudden arrival yet to fade. "I hope not." He found himself scared to lay too close to her. The magnetic pull was strong enough with almost five inches in between them. If he dared to touch her again he wasn't sure he would be able to hold himself back.

"Are we gonna be that couple that rents a motel room on prom night just to get some privacy?" When he looked over at her he could tell she was only half kidding with the suggestion.

He mirrored the smile she wore. "Prom is more than a month away." He pointed out. "That's way too long."

"Yeah, your right." She looked back up at the ceiling. "Maybe for one of our birthdays. When's yours?"

"July." He said. "So we have to do yours."

"Mines in January."

"Oh." Mike turned onto his side, raising an eyebrow at her. "Does that make you older than me?"

He watched her face break out into an even larger grin before she looked over at him. "I guess."

"Cougar."

"Shut up."

27. Chapter 27: Jane

Guys I am so so sorry for such a delayed upload. I wanted to make this chapter the best it could possibly be because it is the most important one I have written. In the middle of editing this chapter my life took a really unexpected turn and was really crazy. But things have finally calmed down and I am here to give you the second to last installment. I hope you enjoy it :)

May 28th, 1989

Jane sat at her desk in her room while the second hand on her watched ticked by. Her leg bounced up and down and caused a small squeaking sound from the flats she wore. Through the mirror sitting on her desk she stared at her reflection. Despite how little make up she had on it felt heavy on her skin. Then again every muscle in her body felt heavy.

At the sound of the doorbell she jumped to her feet and burst out of her room, yelling "I'll get it!" as she bolted down the stairs. Though she doubted her mother had even bothered moving from her spot in the kitchen since they both knew exactly who stood on the porch. Once she reached the door she smoothed down her hair, which was pulled back into a braid her mother had done for her, and hoped the gel she had put on had managed to keep her flyaways at bay. She opened the door to find her boyfriend of a just about month and a half dressed in a button up, slacks, and a slightly crooked tie.

The first thing he said as his eyes landed on her was "You look nice." Jane looked down at the brown shirt and white blouse she wore. She looked too much like a grown up. Like a grown up going to their boring nine to five office job. Then again that was the whole point; to look like an adult. He kissed her cheek after stepping inside and seeing her mother was nowhere in sight. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. A little nervous." She said. Jane had been making an effort to be more open about negative emotions since she now had people she could open up to. It was a work in progress, hence her only admitting to be *a little nervous*. It was easily the understatement of the

year. She reached up and straightened out his tie, "What about you?"

"Nervous." He agreed then thanked her when she pulled her hands away. "How's your mom?"

She shrugged, "She's pretending to be too busy to be worried. But I think she's more nervous than I am." Mike glanced down the hall, where her mom's voice could be heard from as she talked on the phone in the kitchen. "Thank you for coming with me."

Mike's eyes found hers again. "I've come with you every single time." He pointed out.

"I know." She said. Jane wrapped her arms around his neck and pulling him into a hug. "Thank you."

He instantly hugged her back and rested his chin on her shoulder. His hand rubbed circles on her back the way he always did before they left. "I love you." Mike told her, then pulled away so he could kiss her forehead. "And I'm really proud of you."

Though he said these exact words every time he came over dressed in the limited number of formal clothes he had they still made her beam. "I love you too." She said.

Her mom's footsteps, exaggerated by the high heels she wore, approached from down the hall. They pulled away before she came into the living room, settling for holding onto each others hands. Grabbing her purse and keys off of the coffee table she looked at them. "You guys ready?"

"Ready." Jane answered on behalf of them both

They followed Terry out of the house, closing and locking the door behind them. Jane slid into the back seat next to Mike. Her hand once again wrapped tightly around his. In the drivers seat her mom turned on her favorite station before pulling out of the driveway and starting the drive towards the courthouse two towns over.

Jane hated the building passionately. It made her feel small in the opposite way the quarry did. She felt helpless and out of control, like an ant desperately trying to run from hundreds of pairs of shiny shoes

ready to squash her. The building was more intimidating than any bully or villain from a movie had ever been. It was cold and unwelcoming and made her want to turn and run back into the car. Appearing brave and confident in a building where she felt weak and microscopic was incredibly difficult. While she'd dealt with worse in her short life it was a feeling she had yet to get used to. Her grip on Mike's hand tightened as they got closer to their destination.

Jane stood between her mother and her boyfriend as they walked up the steps. They were the two people in the world she was closest to. With them by her side she expected to feel invincible. Like she did every time she passed by Troy in the hallway while she walked with Mike or when they sat at the top of the quarry. Instead she felt like the scared little girl who had been locked on the back porch on Christmas after knocking her dad's beer over. She was shaking as the flats she wore connected with the floor of the courthouse. Shaking not from cold, since it was almost June, but with fright. As they stepped into the elevator she held her breath, afraid they would hear how shaky it was in such an enclosed space.

The three of them sat in the front row which was only five feet behind where their lawyer always stood. Mr. Adam Russo was a well spoken man with his numerous college degrees framed in his office. Adam looked like a baby in a suit who must have been a lot older than he looked. One time he went an extra day without shaving and it had just looked wrong. He knew more about the law than Jane ever could. He was kind to them. He was a lawyer specializing in representing domestic violence victims for seven years. But he was stern and serious with every witness for the defense. There weren't many. Some of her father's old friends and co workers who told lies of how much of a good man he was and how he loved his family.

As she sat she stared at the witness stand where she had been almost a week ago, her mom the day before and Mike two days before that. "You're the star of the show." Adam had told her half an hour before her testimony. "You're the one who's gonna put him away, not me. The jury is going to see what a monster like him has done to an angel like you and send him right behind bars." Though she'd promised herself she would never shed another tear over her father she broke down so hard they almost had to take recess. She had managed to

hold it together until one simple question. "What was the scariest part?"

The scariest moment of her life, by far, was thinking that she could loose the boy she loved. The boy who liked that she wore jeans and T-shirts and who pulled out her hair tie because he liked her curly hair. Who she had to beg not to walk her to gym class because it would make him late for math. The thought of loosing Mike, who looked at her like he'd never seen a girl before, was the scariest thought that had ever entered her mind. Every time her father entered the courtroom and looked right at them a sense of protectiveness for him came over her. So she continued to cling to his hand as the courtroom started to fill.

Just about ten minutes after they arrived the courtroom was packed. An officer brought her father out, silver handcuffs standing out against his black suit. She could feel his eyes, grey and cold, watching her as he made his way over to his lawyer. Moments before he reached the defendants table Jane kissed Mike on the lips, then looked directly at her father for the first time since she had been snuck out of her house. Anger was written clear as day over his face but she turned away and pretended not to notice.

Twelve jurors filled the room, taking the same seats they did every day. Jane's eyes met with juror number four. A girl who couldn't have been more than twenty years old. During her testimony Jane could see the lump in the girls throat and her red eyes all the way from the witness stand. She intended to ask her lawyer if it was possible for her to speak to the girl before they left.

The judge's voice, strong and full of authority, filled the room. "Will the defendant please rise." As her father got to his feet she felt both Mike and her mom's grip tighten on her hands. Jane's heart pounded as loud as the gavel across the room. If she too had been told to stand she may have collapsed. Even sitting down her legs started to tremble. There was no way they would have supported her. "Has the jury reached a verdict?"

"We have, your honor." Juror number one answered. He was a man in his thirties with a receding hairline who always wore sweater vests. He had shown no emotion the entire trial save for one moment. As

her father desperately tried to convince the jury that he loved his family, a single fake tear streaming down his cheek, juror number one was unable to look at him and instead stared at his lap with an expression of not entirely masked anger.

This is it.

Jane wanted to get up and run out of the room. If she never heard the verdict she would never have to face the possibility of receiving the wrong one. She wanted to run all the way to the quarry, a place where she and Mike frequented over the weekends and now her favorite spot in Hawkins. Jane wanted to stand at the edge of the cliff and scream until her voice betrayed her. Then she would jump and survive the fall and deal with the pain she felt when her body collided with the water. She would survive because at the quarry she was invincible. There she was all powerful. Jane would then drift down the river, only getting out when her lips turned blue. Then she would climb out of the water and go to Mike's house, where he would let her borrow clothes she would 'accidentally' forget to give back.

None of this happened. Jane's body didn't move an inch as juror number one opened the envelope in his hand.

"On count one, assault in the first degree, how do you find?"

Jane in Mike's arms behind her locked door while her father screamed at her and told her all the awful things he would do if she didn't open the door this damn second. Crying as her mind forced her to picture what would happen if he got his hands on the boy she loved with all her heart. Thinking that she might only get one more chance to tell him how she felt and taking it because she refused to let Mike live his life another second without knowing she was truly and totally in love with him.

"Guilty."

A sigh of relief, as powerful as the 1920's dustbowls, left her body. There were still four more charges to go. But no matter the other verdicts her father was going to jail.

"On count one, battery in the first degree, how do you find?"

Jane crying while she listened to her mother beg as she was hit repeatedly. Begging not for herself but for her daughter; named after a pure character in a book full of phony's. Begging for her daughter who put butterfly bandaids on her mothers wounds the first time she ever saw her get hit. Her daughter who she had cursed because she married a man she'd been dating for only a year at the age of eighteen. No matter how hard he hit her the pain could never compare to the pain Terry would live with at the life she had brought her daughter into.

"Guilty."

Out of the corner of her eye Jane saw her mom clap a hand over her mouth as she tried to hold back the sob that escaped her lips. Two out of four. She repeated these numbers in her head as both the judge and juror waited for the murmurs in the room to die down before they continued.

"On count two, battery in the first degree, how do you find?"

Jane crying so loud that her fathers attention moved towards her. Watching him pick a cookbook up off the kitchen counter and throw it at her. The corner of the 150 page hardcover book colliding with her chin, leaving the bruise Lizzie covered up with makeup several shades too light for her skin two days later. Her father storming towards her when she only cried harder and pushing her against the wall. The pain that washed over her as her head collided with the wall and how red his face turned as he screamed at her to shut her goddamn mouth before she really regretted it. A detail Mike had only learned when she took the stand.

"Guilty."

He brought her hand up to his lips, kissing her knuckle before pressing her palm against his chest. His heart pounded just quickly as hers did. She tore her eyes away from the scene playing out in front of her so she could look at him. Mike was already looking at her, and silently mouthed 'I love you' when her eyes met his.

She didn't think she had ever loved anyone or anything more in her life more than she loved him in that moment.

"On count one, endangering the welfare of a child, how do you find?"

Jane sitting on the back porch on Christmas Day. Her feet bare as snow fell from the sky in fat flakes. Programmed to blame herself she chastised herself for being stupid enough to not wear slippers. Inside she could hear her parents yelling and hated that she couldn't be there to be the target of his anger. It was her they were fighting about. Her mother had to suffer due to her stupidity and clumsiness. She silently prayed that none of the neighbors would come outside and see her sitting in the snow wearing only a T-shirt and pajama pants.

The only charge taking place before their move to Hawkins.

"Guilty."

Terry wrapped her arms around Jane, now openly letting her tears flow. She whispered in her ear that it was over, that they were safe. And for the first time since Jane had seen her mother get hit she felt safe. He would no longer get away with what he did to them. This punishment would not end early due to overcrowding. She would never have to worry about having to please him so she would stay on his good side.

They. Were. Safe.

While her father was led out of the room Jane turned to Mike. She hid her head in his neck and squeezed him tight. She was only vaguely aware of what was going on around her but none of it mattered. Her father had taken a lot from her in her seventeen years of life. But he hadn't taken Mike.

As she pulled away from him the jurors got to their feet and headed towards the door they had come from. Jane's brown eyes locked once more with the green ones of juror number four who gave her a simple smile before she turned and followed the rest out of the room. She would soon learn that she wasn't allowed to talk to any of the jurors and would be left wondering about juror number four for the rest of her life.

Adam turned toward them as they got to their feet, a wide grin on his face. He hugged Jane and her mother, then shook hands with Mike. Terry thanked him for everything he'd done for them, to which he replied "I didn't do anything. It was all you guys."

He followed them as they turned to walk out of the courtroom. They didn't get halfway towards the door before a man with a camera around his neck and a notebook in his hand intercepted them. He introduced himself, told them he was a reporter, and asked if there was anything they wanted to say. Both Terry and Mike replied with a short response about how relieved they were that the whole ordeal was over. When he looked at Jane, waiting for a quote from her she glanced at her mom as if to ask for permission. She'd never spoken to any kind of reporter before and didn't know if she should. Her mom nodded and put her hand on her shoulder. "I've been punished and unable to feel safe in my own house for my whole life for nothing." She told him. "It's about time he get a taste of his own medicine."

He eagerly scribbled in his notebook and thanked them as they passed him. When Jane read her words in a newspaper article three days later she would worry if anyone at school would read them too. They did. Almost everyone in the school did, student and teacher. Hardly anyone mentioned her father to her or Mike but when they did they were only told that what they did was brave.

From the courthouse they drove to Mike's house where his family was no doubt eagerly awaiting their arrival and news. Jane looked out the window at the world passing by. Everything looked more vibrant and alive than it ever had. For the first time Jane was living her life completely free from her father's influence. All of her senses were heightened as if she'd been coasting through life with a half full battery. She was now fully charged.

Once they were outside of the Wheeler's house Mike hadn't even reached for the knob when the front door flew open. Karen stood in the doorway with concerned eyes looking at all three of them. Her worry quickly faded into relief when she saw the smile they all wore. She hugged Jane first, then Terry, and then her son, before she led them inside. In the short time she had been regularly been going to Mike's house she had quickly learned his father was not a man who expressed much emotion. Yet as they came inside and told him the good news he smiled wider than Jane had ever seen him then shook both her and her mom's hand.

While the adults talked she and Mike went up to his room to call their friends. Jane first dialed the phone number for Lizzie's house

where both she and Max were waiting to hear the news. She held the receiver between her and Mike as they pressed their heads together so they could both talk. Before she could even finish telling her friends when an excited screech came from the other line. They told her how happy they were for her, and that they knew things would turn out positive in the end. It was a lie and Jane knew it but she appreciated it none the less. Once they hung up they called the three boys at their houses and told them the news too, reviving similar reactions of relief and congratulations.

After setting down the receiver she looked up at Mike, watching him loosen his tie until the knot rested on his chest. "How are you feeling?" He asked her, the words this time coming out without an ounce of worry

She began taking the bobby pins out of her hair since she was eager to not look so formal. It was exhausting. Jane thought for a moment, struggling to find the perfect word to describe how she felt. There were so many emotions she'd experienced over the past two months that not a word in her vocabulary could perfectly describe, forcing her to settle for ones that were just good enough. "I feel... relieved."

He smiled, leaning against the desk in his room she sat on. "It's a shame I won't get to see you all dressed up so often anymore."

Jane rolled her eyes and threw a bobby pin at him, which harmlessly bounced off his arm. "Prom is in, like, a month. I think you'll survive."

Mike raised an eyebrow at her, "Did you buy your dress yet?"

"Yeah, of course." She told him. Jane had her dress picked out since the week he asked her. The process was incredibly stressful and she already wasn't looking forward to going through it again for her senior prom.

"Can you show it to me?"

"No!" She said immediately. "I can't show you. It's bad luck."

He scoffed at her, "That's wedding dresses, not prom dresses."

She dropped the last bobby pin onto his desk next to where she sat.

Though she doubted she would remember to bring them with her when she left. "I think it's both."

Mike moved to stand in front of her, placing his hands on the top of his desk on either side of her. It was the closest they had ever been in height, thanks to his desk standing almost three inches taller than her waist. To kiss him she simply had to straighten her posture. With his loosened tie and slightly messy hair, thanks to her pushing it back on the car ride to his house, he was still so effortlessly handsome. "Do you know how proud I am of you?" He suddenly asked

She wrapped her fingers around his tie, pulling the knot down until it came undone. "I don't know." She said, "Do I?"

"No." He told her, "I don't think you do. You told a room full of stranger about the scariest things I could ever imagine happening. And you handled it so well."

Jane rolled her eyes. As much as she had been working on trying to give herself more credit she wasn't quite able to wholeheartedly believe what he was saying. "I cried." She pointed out to prove him wrong

"Yeah, you did." He said, "But so did I."

She immediately perked up, her eyes searching his face for a sign he was lying just to make her feel better. Instead she found that he looked completely serious. "You did?"

"Yeah. You were just brave enough to do it in front of everyone."

Jane put her hands on his neck while a small frown appeared on her face. While she certainly wasn't in a place to judge him from keeping secrets she still couldn't help but be surprised. She felt the same protectiveness she often felt for him come over her. "When did you cry?"

Mike sighed, leaning his head back a bit. "I don't want to talk about it."

"You sound like me." She said. Her hands moved to the back of his head, pushing it upright again so he was forced to look at her again.

"Mike, please tell me."

He stared at her for a few moments, trying to decide how to respond. His eyes were so brown she could only see his pupils if she looked closely. He was so unfairly attractive and she felt unbelievably lucky that he was hers. Mike sighed once more before he finally spoke again. "One time was the day you testified." Jane stayed quiet despite the fact she desperately wanted to ask him to elaborate on 'one time'. Though there was really no need for him to explain. She knew exactly what he meant. "I hated that I just had to watch you talk about everything and I couldn't do anything to help you. And I hate that I was only there to protect you one time out of a hundred."

More like a thousand. But of course she kept the thought to herself. "You didn't even know me then."

"I know. It's stupid." He said, looking away from her.

Jane moved her hands to rest on his cheeks, her thumbs running across his freckles. "Mike." She said seriously. It took him a second for his eyes to meet hers again. "It's not stupid." He didn't look entirely convinced but he didn't try to say otherwise. "Tell me more."

He groaned quietly before he continued. "This whole time I've been so worried that we were doing all of this for nothing. And I felt so powerless that literally all I could do was show up. I couldn't stop thinking about what would happen if he got away with it."

"But he didn't get away with it." She reminded him, "So you don't ever have to think about what would happen again."

His lips twitched into a smile. "I know." He said, "But I didn't know that until like an hour ago."

Jane slid off his desk and landed on her feet. She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head against his chest. As he hugged her back she could feel some of the tension he held start to release. She rubbed his back the way he always did for her. Throughout the entire ordeal Mike had been doing his best to comfort her in any way he could. It was her turn to return the favor. His forehead rested against her neck, his eyelashes tickling her collarbone.

"Was it true what you said when you took the stand?" He asked her. "That the scariest part was thinking that I was going to get hurt?"

"Yes." She answered immediately. "You and him have always been separate, and were always supposed to be. I never thought I would have to worry about him hurting you too. And I knew that he would have." Jane sighed, her cheek pressed against the side of his head. "I wish you never had to go through it."

She could feel him hug her tighter. "I don't." He said, his voice slightly muffled. "Then you would have been there alone, and I would never want that." Mike pulled away from her, his hands resting on her cheeks. "I love you, Jane."

Her face broke into a smile. "I love you too, Mike."

From up in his room they could hear the doorbell ringing. They looked at each other curiously before walking out of his room and standing at the top of the stairs, watching his mother struggle to hand a pizza delivery boy money while she held onto the box. One hand holding the box and the other her change Karen had to close the door by lightly kicking it, then bumping it with her hip to latch it.

They were hardly halfway down the stairs before Mike spoke up. "You ordered *pizza*?" He asked in disbelief. Mike had once joked that his mother ordering take out was a sign of the apocalypse. He told her that the only time anyone in his house had ever ordered in was when she wasn't home to cook something for them.

Jane followed him as he trailed after his mom into the kitchen. She glanced at them over her shoulder and shrugged as she set the box down. "I was too worried to cook." She said

Holly, who sat at the kitchen table, jumped up and ran over to Jane when she walked in. She had taken to her ever since the first time she came over for dinner. Every time Jane came over she insisted on sitting next to her. Holly was like the little sister she'd never had but always wanted. Like she always did Jane crouched down so she was now the little girls height and hugged her tightly. With her arms wrapped tightly around Holly she stood and brought her up with her.

"You look so pretty." She said, her blue eyes looking over Jane's outfit
Jane grinned at her. "Thank you so much. But I think I would look prettier with pigtails like yours."

Holly's face immediately lit up. "I can do your hair if you want."

"I would love that." She said, carrying Holly back over to the kitchen table, setting her down on the table top while she sat in a chair in front of her.

She felt the smaller girl take out her hair tie and undo the braid her mom had done earlier, making a comment about how she'd never seen it straight before. As she smoothed out Jane's hair she called over to her older brother while he took plates out of the cabinet. "Mike! Hold this!"

"Yes ma'am." He said, faking a serious tone. Mike came over, took the hair tie from Holly before sitting in the chair next to Jane. "What kind of hairstyle are you gonna do?" He asked her

"It's a secret." She replied, sounding very matter-of-fact

Jane's face spread into a grin as she glanced over at him. "Yeah, Mike." She told him, "It's a secret."

While their moms set up enough plates for everyone and brought them into the other room Holly worked on her hair. She watched Mike's face as he looked at his sisters work, occasionally moving his eyes to meet hers and smiling. Behind her Holly chatted about her day, telling Jane all about how she'd gotten a math test back and got an A. Just as Jane finished praising her she reached her little hand out towards Mike and asked for the hair tie back. Moments later she announced "I'm done."

She brought her hands up to feel the ballet bun, done surprisingly well. Holly had done her hair better than Jane could herself. There were only a few strands that had escaped, all so thin she doubted they were noticeable. She turned in her hair to face her. "I love it."

Holly giggled, "You haven't even seen it yet, how do you know if you love it?"

Jane glanced at Mike, raising an eyebrow at him. "What do you think."

"It looks great." He said

"You're a boy." Holly informed him, "So it doesn't count."

Jane struggled to hold back a giggle, helping her off the table as her mom called from the other room that they were ready to eat. "I already know I love it because I love all of your hairdo's." She told her as she took her seat at the dinning room table, in between Mike and her mom

Dinner was void of any and all mention of the trial or her father, which she didn't mind one bit. It was the beginning of a life where he was not included, the way she always wanted things to be. Their parents chatted about stocks and such adult things she didn't at all care about. Jane and Mike kept Holly entertained, asking her more about her day at school. She told them about something she had made in art but informed them that it was still drying at school so she hadn't been able to bring it home. Oh how Jane wished she was back in kindergarten.

She and Mike had missed numerous days at school over the course of the trial, leaving them with a stack of make up homework they struggled to keep up with. They'd had to talk to both the guidance counselor and the principal in order to be permitted to be absent so many days, then give each of they teachers a note briefly explaining their "extenuating circumstances". Jane seriously doubted Mike would have bee able to get away with it if he hadn't been there, forcing him to be called as a witness. Since he was a witness they, legally, couldn't deny him the days off. Even if he showed up to court on the days he really didn't have to.

Once they finished eating, and everyones plates were put into the sink Jane and Mike retreated upstairs and into his room. Jane lay on his bed and kicked off the flats she wore, letting her feet finally breathe. She felt the bed sink as he lay next to her on his side. The only thing Jane would miss about the trail was seeing Mike dressed up several times a week. But she didn't think she could bare to do the same on such a regular basis so she too would have to wait for prom.

She had been seriously fooling herself when she thought she could change her look after the altercation with Troy. It was like her body wasn't physically able to be comfortable in anything other than jeans and sneakers.

She rolled on her side to face him, pushing his hair out of his face. Mike was due for a haircut, and had been for almost a week. His bangs now fell into his eyes and blocked her usual view of his face. But he didn't seem motivated at all to cut it. A grin spread across her face as an idea occurred to her. "Can I cut your hair?"

He looked at her with a puzzled expression, grabbing her hand and pulling it away from his face. "Who are you, Holly?"

Jane rolled her eyes at him. "Your bangs are too long, and are obstructing my view of you. I don't like it."

"Have you ever cut someone's hair before?" He asked

"Yes." She said defensively. "I cut my own hair a few years ago, plus my own and my friend Kaitlyn's bangs. They both came out great."

Mike didn't seem at all convinced. "I'll get them cut next weekend, how about that."

"Absolutely not." She told him. "That's a whole week away. Your hair's going to get so much longer by then." Jane propped herself up on her elbow, ready to jump up as soon as he agreed. "Cutting bangs is really easy, especially since you already have them."

He stared at her, silently thinking over how to respond. She debated doing it anyway even if he said no. It was in his best interest to agree, since she had a feeling it wouldn't turn out as well if she cut his bangs against his will. Just as she considered not waiting for an answer he let out a sigh. "Fine."

Jane smiled widely, bolting upright and sliding off the bed. He told her where the scissors were in the bathroom as she practically ran down the hall. She grabbed them off the shelf and brought a towel with her on the way back. When she came back into his room he was sitting up on his bed, not looking entirely excited. She sat cross

legged facing him, warning him "Don't look up my skirt" before she sat down. He laughed and kept his eyes focused on her face. Jane laid the towel down, wide enough to cover both of their laps. Their knees touched as she got as close to him as she could.

She wondered how she'd never thought to cut his hair before. It was the perfect excuse for them to be close and for her to stare at him. She tucked the rest of his hair behind his ears, which caused him to let out a groan of protest, so that it would be easier to focus only on his bangs. Jane saw him wince when the scissors snipped off the first strands and told him to relax.

"Even if I mess up; hair grows back." She reminded him

"I'd rather you not mess up in the first place."

Jane ignored him, fully confident in her ability to cut small amounts of hair.

When she was done she untucked the remainder of his hair and leaned back to evaluate how she'd done. She had to hold back from telling him he'd worried for nothing. After moving the towel off their laps she followed him as he walked over to the mirror on the back of his door. She carefully watched his expression through the reflection. The smile that appeared on his face after a few moments instantly transferred onto her on twice in size.

"Okay, yeah." He admitted, "You did a good job."

"Told you." She said, bumping his shoulder with her own.

He turned to face her, putting his hands on her waist. Jane suddenly felt like the luckiest person in the world. Not only was her father now in prison after years of mistreatment, but she had ended up stronger because of it. Plus she had her mother and her boyfriend, who supported her endlessly. Not to mention the fact that his family had accepted her with open arms. If all of that wasn't enough she had an amazing group of friends, in addition to the ones she still had upstairs, who were incredibly understanding about the situation she was in. It was so much good she almost didn't know what to do with it.

Mike kissed her forehead, the only part of her tall enough that he didn't have to lean down to reach. "I'm so lucky to have you." He said, as if he was having the same train of thought as her.

Jane looked up at him, her lips turning up into a smile. "I'm lucky." She stood on her toes and kissed him.

It was remarkable how quickly she had fallen for him. Like she was standing on top of the tallest building in Indiana and had been pushed over the edge. She hadn't fallen for him, she *plummeted*. If he hadn't been waiting for her down on the ground she would have crashed straight through the ground and into the center of the earth.

Their relationship had felt like they were sitting in the same car on a rollercoaster. So many twists and turns that it made her head spin. She had desperately clung to him to keep from falling off the ride, determined not to let go. Had Mike not held onto her too she would have fallen right out and gotten whisked away. But suddenly the ride was over. Her legs were wobbly, and she needs him to hold her up. But it was over. For the first time she would be able to worry only about the things normal teenagers did, something she had longed for ever since she was young.

She pulled away from the kiss and looked up at Mike, knowing she would hold onto him long after she was able to walk on her own.

xXx

"Mom, we're going to stop by Lizzie's house." Mike said as the two of them stood in the kitchen. "She just called and asked us to stop by."

Both Karen and Terry looked up from the glasses of wine they had poured since their kids went upstairs. "Okay." She replied. "Just don't stay out too late."

"We won't."

They turned and headed to the front door. Since Lizzie only lived down the street they decided to walk. Darkness had fallen over Hawkins since they got back from the courthouse. The only light around them were street lights scattered across the street. As they

walked through the neighborhood their hands were linked together. A weightless feeling had settled over her in the past few hours. After years of hearing her mother promise that everything would be fine it, for once, truly was. Sentencing was scheduled for sometime the next week. Anything could happen but Jane wasn't worried. He'd been found guilty on all four counts and had prior charges. What was there to worry about?

"What did she say on the phone again?" Jane asked. Dark shadows were cast across his face from the minimal street light and he looked like something out of an edgy looking movie.

Mike shrugged. "Just that she wanted us to stop by before you went home."

They walked up to Lizzie's front door before Jane rang the doorbell. From inside she heard hushed voices, which she assumed belonged to her and Max. There were a few moments of silence before the door swung open. Lizzie and Max stood in the doorway, with the boys close behind them, all wearing party hats and holding noise makers. "Surprise!" They all yelled.

As Jane stood silent in total shock Lizzie placed a party hat on top of Mike's head. "Glad to see you don't suck at lying anymore." She teased

"I told you; I'm good with surprises." He said

She looked between Mike and her friends as they all grinned at her. Though she was thoroughly confused. Jane couldn't imagine the look on her face as she tried to figure out what was happening. "What the hell is going on?"

"We threw you a party." Max said. She came onto the porch and put a party hat on her head.

"Why? It's not my birthday."

Max rolled her eyes, then grabbed her hand and pulled her inside. Hanging above the staircase was a messily made banner that said *DADS SUCK!* "Good news deserves a celebration."

She looked at all her friends as they watched for her reaction. Jane suddenly felt as if she might cry. She loved them all so much. They supported her through every bump in the road over the past month, big or small. When she had a bad day they were eager to jump at the opportunity to make after school plans in hopes of making her feel better. Instead of crying she took the party hat Max held out to her. As she put it on her head Dustin and Lucas started chanting "speech, speech, speech" then pulled her over to the stairs so she would have an elevated platform.

Jane struggled to suppress her laughter long enough to speak. Once she finally did she wracked her brain for something deep to say. When her mind came up blank she instead said "All I have to say is; fuck my dad!"

They all laughed and started yelling "Fuck your dad!" Jane seriously Lizzie's parents weren't home.

28. Epilogue

we've made it to the epilogue! I won't say much because I'm uploading an authors note immediately after this but I hope you enjoy this last installment.

June 26th, 1989

"Mama!" Jane called, hurrying out of her room and standing at the top of the stairs. "Have you seen my earrings?"

"They're right here on the coffee table where you left them!" Her mom called back from the living room.

She ran down the stairs, her flats clicking on each step. Jane spotted the bag from the jewelry store she'd been looking for before she even got all the way down the staircase. She could hear her mom gasping as she grabbed the bag off the table and pulled out the box inside.

Her mom stood up from the couch, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Jane, you look beautiful."

After Mike asked her to go to prom with him Jane started the search for a dress almost instantly. She quickly found out she didn't like any of the dresses in the store. The large shoulder pads and vibrant colors didn't exactly suit her. Since the next closest dress store was two towns over, and way too expensive for their budget, Jane was at a loss. Like every other melodramatic teenager who couldn't find something to wear she felt like the world was going to end. Her mother quickly saved the day by suggesting that Jane wear her old prom dress back from the 60's and get it altered to fit her. That weekend they drove up to her grandparents house, where her moms dress was, and brought it back down to Hawkins.

When she had put on the dress and looked in the mirror she felt like Frenchie from Grease. It was almost identical to the yellow dress in the movie only a light baby blue version. Which was an incredible relief since blue looked much better on her than yellow did. The hem had been shortened, since her mother was a good bit taller than her,

along with a few other altercations.

Jane wasn't used to feeling beautiful. It was a bit of a foreign concept to someone typically so plain. But for once she truly did. As she put in her earrings she looked up at the clock on the wall, her eyes widening. "6:50 already?" She said, running back towards the stairs. "Mike's going to be here in ten minutes and I'm nowhere near ready!"

She bolted up the stairs and collapsed at her desk where every item of makeup she owned was laid out. All she had done, besides getting dressed, was her hair. Jane did her makeup as quickly as she could without making it look messy. On top of her desk she had a magazine flipped open to a page she wanted to use as a reference. The girl in the picture had blue eyeshadow, dramatic lashes, and pink lipstick. Jane seriously doubted her lashes were that long, and lipstick wasn't really her thing. So she was simply aiming for the eyeshadow look.

Applying makeup was yet another foreign experience to her. Especially powder. For the first time she wished either she or her mom were more girly so one of them would know how to do makeup. She put the powder on her face, noticing a little too late that it wasn't quite her color. Then she picked up her small eyeshadow pallet. The one with six colors that she'd gotten from a drugstore a year ago under her friends influence and had hardly touched since.

After five minutes of applying and then wiping away she was finally satisfied with her work. Instead of the hot pink lipstick the girl in the picture wore she opted for lipgloss. It was much more subtle and Jane was already a bit too noticeable for her liking. Once she was done she got up and stood in front of the mirror on the back of her door. With the combination of the dress she wore, her makeup, and her hair which was wavy instead of curly she looked almost like an entirely different person. Almost. She still looked enough like herself to be recognizable.

Jane was still surveying herself in the mirror when she heard the doorbell ring. She hurried over to the window, a large grin spreading on her face at the sight of Mike's car parked outside her house. With one last look in the mirror, making sure she looked as perfect as she could, she opened her door and headed for the stairs.

xXx

Once the flash of the camera went off Mike let go of Holly's hand and let the smile on his face drop. "Okay, that's enough." He told his mom, who lowered the camera in her hands so she could look at him. They'd been taking pictures for almost ten minutes which, in his opinion, was nine minutes more than necessary. "I have to go pick up Jane."

"Just one more, I promise." She told him which only caused him to roll his eyes. "You haven't taken any with me."

"Okay, but quickly."

She stood in the doorway of the living room and starred at his father who was sat in front of the television. "Ted? Can you come and take my picture with Mike?"

It took a moment for her words to fully register and for him to push himself to his feet. He took the camera from Karen before she came over to Mike. She straightened his jacket for the hundredth time then stood next to him and put her arm around his waist. "I can't believe how grown up you are."

"Mom-

"I'm done."

His father snapped one picture then handed the camera back to his mom. Before anyone could take anymore pictures Mike grabbed his keys off the keyring and insisted that he had to leave to pick up Jane. He quickly headed out the front door, closing it behind him and hurrying to his car.

As he drove to Jane's house a swarm of butterflies erupted in his stomach. Prom was something entirely out of his element. Hanging out with Jane at lunch or her house was familiar to him and comfortable. But a school dance was a world totally unknown to him. He had been to dances before back in middle school. But that was something else entirely. Middle school was a life before Jane and when their friend groups had yet to collide. As scared as he was he

would be with Jane. He had to remind himself that they had been through so much worse than a school dance.

He pulled up in front of her house and looked up at her illuminated bedroom window. Mike waited for a few moments, hoping to catch a glance of her, but after not seeing any sign of her he gave up and got out. As he walked up to her house he wiped his now sweaty palms on his pants. He rang the doorbell and waited anxiously for the front door to open. After counting all the way to ten it finally opened and revealed her mom standing in the doorway.

Over the course of the trial he had gotten even closer with Jane's mom than she had with his. She stood to the side so he could walk in, then gave him a hug once she closed the door. "Mike, you look great." She told him, adjusting his jacket in the same motherly way his own mom had been doing for almost an hour. "Your hair's getting so long too."

"I'm surprised Jane hasn't tried to cut it yet." He said, a smile starting to grow. It had taken his mom almost ten minutes to notice his cut bangs the night Jane came over after the trial. He was admittedly a bit surprised that she had done such a good job.

"Well I don't think there will be any scissors laying around tonight so you're safe for now." Terry said. She then lowered her voice so her daughter upstairs wouldn't hear. "She's been getting ready for almost an hour. I think she's a little nervous."

Mike kept his voice quiet too. "Really?"

"She probably wouldn't admit it, but yeah."

If his mother had admitted something like that to Jane he would have been mortified. But Terry was much better at knowing how to keep her voice down.

After hearing he wasn't alone in his nervousness he began to feel better. He stayed downstairs and talked with her mom for a minute or two more while he waited for Jane to come downstairs. When he heard her bedroom door open and close his anxiety started to peak. Mike quickly turned around at the sound of her footsteps. He

struggled to keep his mouth from hanging open when she came down enough for him to see her, yet he still wasn't sure he had fully succeeded.

She came over to him with a shy smile. Mike was suddenly scared his heart was going to beat out of his chest. "You look beautiful." He told her

"Thank you." She said. Blush quickly rose to her cheeks. "You look really nice too."

He would have undoubtedly stared at her forever, and would have gladly done so, if her mom hadn't spoken up a few feet away. "Okay, just one picture I promise."

Though he doubted it would truly only be one picture he didn't mind waiting a little longer. Out of all the pictures that would likely be taken that night the ones he wanted the most were ones with Jane. She was already the most beautiful girl he knew, by far, but she now looked like Jane 2.0. A new version of something that needed no improvement yet managed to make some somehow. She'd never worn the shade of blue he dress was before and he intended to buy her a shirt in the same color it looked so good on her.

They stood next to one another with their arms around each others waists, wearing wide smiles as her mom held up the camera. When Mike dropped her off later that night he intended to ask her mom if he could get a copy of the picture. Maybe two. He had a feeling two would be better, since his mom would likely want to have a copy to put in a picture frame. Her mom snapped, at the most, three pictures, before lowering the camera and revealing a wide grin on her face. He half expected her to take a few more until she set the device down on the table.

"Okay, now you kids get out of here before you miss the party." She told them

Jane grabbed her purse off of the coffee table, giving her mom a quick hug and kiss on the cheek before linking her arm with Mike's as they headed out the door. He struggled to not stare at her as they walked towards his car and was only somewhat successful. She met

his gaze and flashed him a wide smile. One strong enough to make his heart melt into a puddle.

When they got in the car Jane dug in the glove compartment for the mixtape she had made specifically to keep in his car that was filled with her favorite songs. Girls Just Wanna Have Fun, which was surprisingly her favorite song, was a track on the tape twice. She popped it in and the first song started to play (Never Gonna Give You Up by Rick Astley which, for some reason, always made her laugh whenever she heard it). As he started the car and drove away from her house he was now forced to keep his eyes fixed elsewhere from her. Which was admittedly a disappointing realization.

Like she always did when she sat in her passengers seat she was turned to face him. She rested her elbow on the armrest and propped her chin up on her hand. "Are you excited?" She asked

"Yeah." He said, sparing a quick glance at her. "Are you?"

Her smile grew even more. "Totally."

"You know Stacey was right." Mike told her. "It's too bad you're not a senior. You would definitely be prom queen if you were."

In his peripheral vision he saw her roll her eyes and let out a groan. "I definitely would *not* be."

"Well I guess we'll never know, since we're still juniors." He said, then added "Of course there is next year."

"No way I would be prom queen." She said and pushed his arm gently

Though he knew she was right, that prom queen was a perfect example of how much control the social hierarchy of high school had on situations, he still thought she looked enough like royalty. Despite how much he loved her natural beauty, makeupless face, and crazy curls he also loved seeing her so done up. If he weren't forced to keep his hands on the wheel he would have been running them through her hair. He would have to wait for when he pulled into the parking lot of the school.

"It's weird how fast this year went." Jane said as she gazed out the

window. "We're going to be seniors in a few months."

"There's a whole season between now and then." He reminded her

She looked over at him, "Yeah, that's true." She admitted. "But summer is three months. That's the same amount of time I've been here."

Mike suddenly felt what he imagined she was feeling. The time that they had known each other had flown by. Would summer go by just as quickly? He certainly hoped not. Mike intended to spend as much time with her over the vacation as he possibly could. From the few jokes she made about them spending every day together when the break finally came he assumed she was thinking the same thing. Three months on paper was a long time. But Jane was right. He suddenly felt like he had to go shopping for school books.

"Do you know where you're going to apply to college?" Jane asked.

It was the first time they had ever discussed life after high school and it was already a conversation he didn't like. One of the most well known facts about high school relationships was that they typically didn't last long after graduation. The thought that the same would happen to him and Jane made him feel sick. He liked to think that they would succeed unlike everyone else because he'd yet to find a relationship between kids their age quite like theirs. They'd been through the ringer together and dealt with things he doubted anyone else in Hawkins High School had experienced. Still it was sometimes hard to convince himself.

Instead of saying anything going through his head he simply responded with "No, not really." Then added "Do you?"

"No." She admitted. "Though I'd like to go somewhere with a good English department."

Mike raised his eyebrows. She'd never said a word about college before but her answer didn't quite surprise him. Her grades in English completely dominated his own and not just because she read one of the books already. He had proofread the research paper she did for the class and, though he knew she would never admit it, it was

fantastic. His jaw had practically dropped on the floor when she showed him the score she'd gotten on the final; a 93%. "Do you want to major in English?"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw her shrug. "Maybe." She said, then looked at him with a small smile. "I haven't had that much time to think about it."

She certainly had a point. Mike had scrambled to study for finals after the trial ended. It had been so hard to focus on anything else up until then. His grades had started to slip effortlessly. Needless to say he put 110% into studying so he could make up for the slacking he'd been doing. All of his teachers were understanding of the situation, the little they knew about it, and a few had even told him they were surprised yet glad he had done so well on his final exams.

Prom was being held in the ballroom of a hotel in the next town over, one of the few nice places that was suitable for the occasions. When he pulled into the parking lot a few minutes later it was already decently filled up. He spotted a few students walking inside, all dressed nicely but not nearly as nice as Jane. Mike turned off the car and dropped his keys in his pocket, then looked over at her. "Ready?"

xXx

Jane starred across the parking lot at the entrance to the ballroom with large double doors propped open to give her a limited view of the dimly illuminated room. From where she sat she could already see some of the decorations, including a balloon archway right in front of the doors. She was suddenly overcome with nervousness and self consciousness for reasons unknown. The best excuse she could come up with was her sudden change in appearance. Only six people in school had seen her wear something other than jeans. The thought that everyone would see her looking so, dare she say, glamorous made her heart pound.

She looked over at Mike when he spoke, some of her nerves instantly fading away. Throughout everything he had been her rock. He answered every time she called him and didn't hesitate to come over when she needed in-person comfort. When she started to feel overwhelmed at school she simply reminded herself that Mike wasn't

far away. Had she been sitting in the car alone she may have been to nervous to get out. But he was there with her. They'd faced much worse than a school dance.

"Ready."

She opened the car door and stepped out, her arm wrapping around his once she stood next to him. Her heart pounded as they walked towards the building so she inched towards him. The closer they got the more clearly she could hear music playing loudly inside. She couldn't help but wonder why dances always had the music so loud so she had to scream to talk to the person next to her. She'd lost her voice after the last dance she'd been to a few years back.

When they walked inside Jane quickly surveyed the room. There were balloons, tinsel, and large cut out stars covering the entire room. Hanging from the ceiling was a disco ball, spinning slowly and sending scattered reflections across the walls and floor. Students were already dancing in the middle of the room while others were closer to the walls sitting or getting food from three tables pushed together. They decided to first find the rest of their friends and walked towards the tables on the right side of the room.

They walked close to the walls to avoid getting in the way of dancers. Jane recognized most people in the room and took note of what everyone was wearing. The majority of the girls sported big hair and dramatic shoulder pads/ruffles. Needless to say she stood out with her shoulder less dress that was *so twenty years ago*. As they walked through the room a few eyes fell on the pair and were instantly drawn to the dress Jane wore. A girl in her math class, who she'd only spoken to a handful of times but was always nice, smiled at her as she passed. By the time they reached their friends Jane's cheeks were ablaze.

The first to notice them walking over was Dustin, who's eyes went wide before he blurted out "Holy shit."

Everyone else turned towards them as they sat in the two empty seats. Max, who sat next to Jane, starred at her as if they'd never met. "Holy shit is right." She agreed, reaching for the outer layer of tool on her dress. "Where the hell did you find this?"

"It was my moms." She said, "We just got it altered a little."

Lizzie, who sat across the table between Will and Dustin, grinned at her. "You look like you're in Grease."

"*I know.*"

Max smirked at her. "You gonna do the leather look next?"

Jane bumped her shoulder with her own. "I'm saving that for graduation." She joked

She looked at the dresses her two friends wore. They looked just as transformed as she was. Lizzie, who *never* wore her hair down, had finally ditched her ponytail. Her hair, perfectly blonde and perfectly straight, went almost all the way down to her elbows. The shade of red lipstick she wore perfectly matched her dress, and Jane was pretty sure she was wearing mascara as well. Max hadn't undergone as much of a transformation as she and Lizzie had yet still looked much more girly than usual. She wore a dress that looked like it was taken directly out of Cyndi Lauper's closet, which was surprisingly fitting. Her hair was tied up in a French braid. Almost as long as Lizzie's but not quite.

"Hey, Mike." Lucas, who sat on his other side, said to him. "Guess what."

"What?"

"You came with a date." He said before pointing at a table almost ten feet away. "And Troy didn't."

Everyone looked over at the table where Troy sat with a handful of his friends. Sure enough they were all male. Not to mention he didn't look nearly as dashing as Mike. While he sported an all black suit, looking incredibly classy, Troy was wearing a grey suit that didn't quite fit him. Jane looked back over at Mike who starred speechlessly at his bully for a few moments before his gaze returned to his friends. "Wow." He said simply.

"Ever think that would happen?" Will asked him

"Absolutely not."

Jane glanced back over at Troy to find he was already looking at her. Their eyes met for a brief moment before he turned away while a sheepish expression took over his face. He'd yet to bother her or any of her friends since the incident and she had even noticed him picking on people less in the hallways between class. It seemed the wound to his ego was worse than she thought it had been. For a second she felt a pang of guilt. If there was anything she'd learned from her father it was that violence wasn't the answer.

She bit her bottom lip, her brows coming together. A question hung heavily over her head; should she or shouldn't she. Jane reminded herself that Troy had no way of knowing what her home life was like, or what anyone's home life was like for that matter, when he bullied people. She knew as little about his life as he had about hers. Before she could talk herself out of it she pushed her chair back. "I'll be right back." She told her friends before walking across the room.

Halfway before she reached his table one of his friends pointed her out. Troy turned towards her in his chair, fear briefly crossing over his face. The seed of guilt that had just been planted in her stomach started to sprout. She could feel the awkwardness before she even reached him. Jane cleared her throat, looking down at him. "Hi."

"Hi?" He replied, his response coming out sounding like a question. His friends looked just as shocked about her presence as he did.

"Um..." She scolded herself slightly for not planning out what she was going to say before coming over. "I just- I'm sorry I hit you. It was immature and I shouldn't have done it." He glanced at his friends as if to make sure he was hearing her correctly. She continued before he could answer. "What you said was really immature too, but you didn't deserve to get hit."

Troy blinked at her. Jane may as well have been speaking a different language he looked so confused. A few moments passed before he finally spoke. "I'm... sorry too." The words seemed to struggle to come out of his mouth. She wondered if he'd ever apologized in his life. "That stuff about your dad that's in the paper, is it true?"

"Yes."

He let out a short puff of air. "I didn't know you had that shit going on. I wouldn't have said it if I knew."

Her lips tugged into a hint of a smile. "Thank you." She said, "But you shouldn't have said it anyway."

His expression turned even more sheepish. "You're right."

Jane turned away with just enough time to see the shocked expressions written across all his friends faces before she heard Troy's voice behind her again. "Jane?" She turned back towards him, her eyebrows raised. "Tell Wheeler I'm sorry, too."

Her smile grew. "Why don't I tell all of them?"

"Yeah." He agreed after a moments hesitation. "Okay."

As she walked back to her friends Jane was beaming. It was such a shame no one had managed to stand up to him before. Especially since it seemed to be the thing that caused a bit of change in him. Besides he wasn't so scary. He was one person, shorter than Mike was and with an average amount of muscle for someone his age. Why was everyone so intimidated by him? She considered that she was the only one who hadn't been scared since she'd faced far more evil men than Troy Harrington. He was the equivalent to the kid that chased people on the playground in comparison to someone else she'd had to face.

Her friends gawked at her when she returned to her seat, Max being he first one to speak up. "What the hell was that?"

"I apologized for hitting him." She said simply

Her friend looked at the others at the table, making sure she wasn't crazy, then back at Jane. "And why would you do that?"

"Because I shouldn't have hit him. Violence only makes a conflict worse. It doesn't solve anything." No one had an argument against her so instead of offering one they looked over at Troy's table. "He apologized too."

Across from her Will's jaw dropped. "*Really?*"

She nodded. "Yup." She told them. "And not just to me. To all of you."

This seemed to be the one thing she said that they didn't believe. "No way." Dustin said, "Troy would never apologize to people like us."

"I'm people like you and he apologized to me." Jane pointed out. "I think he only did it because he was doing it through me." She let them sit with the thought before adding "He originally just wanted to apologize to Mike but I suggested he include the rest of you."

"He was probably just scared you would hit him again." Lizzie said, leaning her chin on her hand

Jane shook her head, "I think he meant it." She looked over at Mike, a wide smile growing on her face. "Now you have a date *and* an apology. How does it feel?"

He smiled back at her, his hand wrapping around hers. "I think I'm dreaming."

xXx

Mike dumped his now empty plate into the garbage as the song shifted from Girls Just Wanna Have Fun (which Jane was incredibly happy about) to Time After Time. From the spot he stood in, next to Will against the wall, he has a perfect view of her dancing with an equally energetic Lizzie and a slightly muted Max. Seeing her so happy, so totally carefree, was a weight lifted off his shoulders. Though the trial ended about a month before he still worried about her every single day. Just because it was over didn't mean her pain was. She was so good at faking a smile and pretending she was okay that he was forced to learn how to read her well. Seeing her smile so wide that he could see the tops of her teeth, which was always a telltale sign of a genuine smile from her, was a relief.

Next to him Will followed Mike's gaze over to Jane then looked back at him. "She really has you whipped, doesn't she?" He asked, only half joking

Mike couldn't help but smile. "I can't help it."

"I didn't think it was possible for you to like her more than you did when you met her." Will admitted, "Man was I wrong."

"I love her." He knew he'd never said so in front of his friends before and was sure that Jane hadn't either. One look at Will's face was enough confirmation for him to know he was right. Shocked but not surprised.

As he looked back in Jane's direction he instantly spotted her walking towards him. She slipped between couples who were now slow dancing. A few hairs that had fallen out of place after dancing to such an upbeat song hung on either side of her face with a slight curl at the end. Her cheeks were flushed a light pink color and he can see even from a distance she was still a bit out of breath. When she reached him she grabbed his arm and pulled him onto the dance floor without a word. He kept close to her and squeezed past those who were already dancing. She stopped once they were in an empty spot, turning towards him and wrapping her arms around his neck. Mike pulled her closer to him by his hands on her waist.

"Do you think I did the right thing?" She asked him. "Apologizing to Troy?"

"If you think he really meant what he said then yes." He told her. While he found it hard to believe that Troy Harrington would apologize to him, even if it was through someone else, he trusted her judgement. Besides he hadn't been included in the conversation. He had no choice but to trust her.

Jane thought for a silent moment, her fingers grazing the top of his neck and sending goosebumps up his arms. "I think he meant it." She finally said. "He said he read about my dad in the paper. I think it made him really guilty."

"Good."

A smile spread across her face. Jane was, simply put, the most amazing person he had ever known. And he had a feeling she would remain the most amazing person he'd ever known for a long time if not forever. Only Jane could be focused on his safety twice as much as her own in a dangerous situation or fret about him on the day she

had to take the stand. He didn't know anybody else who would apologize to someone who had said what Troy said about her, not to mention get an apology for all of her friends on his behalf. Jane was magic. There was not a doubt in his mind that she was a completely different species. Humans could not compare to her.

She had cast some kind of spell on him when she walked in the homeroom door on her first day. It was the only explanation he could think of. Before he met Jane he'd thought it was impossible to fall for someone he way he had fallen for her. As fast as the speed of light and deeper than the bottom of the ocean. He especially thought that someone his age couldn't fall in love like he had. Before he met her he thought he would be well into adulthood before he had any sort of strong feelings for a girl. He had been exponentially wrong.

Not only was it so surprising that he had fallen for her in the way that he did but he was even more shocked that she too had fallen for him. She was singlehandedly the most beautiful girl he'd ever encountered. That alone made it difficult for an outsider to believe she had feelings for Frogface Wheeler. But she was also incredibly kindhearted, strong, smart, and funny. She was the perfect package. The few flaws he had found in her, which were pathetically slim, were ones he hardly minded. He'd yet to find a downside to Jane.

"What are you thinking about?" She asked him suddenly.

The train of thought he was in the middle of was too complicated to get into, so he simply answered "That I love you."

Jane beamed at him, standing on her toes and pressing her lips against his. She pulled away quickly so they wouldn't get scolded by the chaperones who patrolled the room ready to catch kids lip locking. The librarian had even made a few couples who danced too close to one another separate. Mike hoped they stayed out of her sight so the same wouldn't happen to them.

"I can't wait for the summer." She said, "Your family's going to get so annoyed with me being at your house so much.

"I doubt that." He told her, "They love you. If both of your parents were unfit they would have adopted you by now."

Jane's nose scrunched up. "I'm glad they haven't." She said, "Then I'd be your sister."

"Ew."

"Yeah."

He was even more thankful than usual that her mother was just as wonderful as she was. The idea of Jane being his sister, even just by adoption, was disturbing to say the least.

Jane pulled one of her hands away just enough to tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear, which was hardly long enough to stay in place. "I think I'm going to buy a bike for the summer." She told him. "That way you don't have to drive me all the time and I can get to places on my own."

"I'll give you my old one." He said. "I don't use it anymore and Holly's too young for it."

Her eyes lit up, her smile growing even more. "Really?"

"Yeah, an you're the same height I was when I was thirteen so it'll be perfect for you."

Jane rolled her eyes at him. "You still haven't shown me any of your pictures from when you were younger." She said, "You promised you would show me."

"I got a little distracted with other things after that conversation."

She smiled at his comment. If anyone else heard them making jokes about the situation with her father they would have likely thought the concept was sick. Mike had learned that by making such lighthearted remarks it made the whole thing less scary. With every day that passed it became easier to make jokes instead of being too scared to talk about it. They agreed it was better that way; desensitized and unafraid.

As the song ended her hands slipped from the back of his neck to his shoulders. "It's hot in here." She said. "Do you want to get some air?"

"Sure."

He held onto her hand as they walked towards the doors they had entered over an hour before. It was hard to believe how quickly the night was going by. Mike wished it would last forever and that he would get to see Jane looking so especially beautiful for more than a couple more hours. Though he knew he would eventually miss her jeans and t-shirts. And he sure as hell didn't want to stay in a suit any longer than he had to. Lizzie was hosting an after party at her house, just for their immediate friend group, but he intended to stop home and change into something much more comfortable before heading to her house. He had a feeling Jane would want to do the same.

They sat on a bench about twenty feet away from the doors. Scarce fireflies lit up for quick seconds before once again disappearing into the darkness. As soon as they sat down Jane kicked off her flats and let her feet hang just about the ground.

"Do your feet hurt?"

"A little." She admitted, "Mostly just sweaty though." He laughed at her honesty and she grinned back at him. They were silent for a few fleeting moments where Mike simply stared at her as her eyes were fixed on the parking lot. "I was always terrified of falling in love." She said, likely in the middle of a train of thought. Jane looked over at him as the corners of her lips turned upwards. "I'm glad it's not as scary as I thought it was."

He wrapped his arm around her waist. "I always thought it was overrated." He admitted. "I also always thought that kids who 'fall in love' in high school were bullshit."

"Really?" She asked

"Yeah, I mean, I never really thought that you could actually fall in love when you're young. Like my parents fell in love and got married right out of high school. And now they're... you know." Jane just nodded in response. "But I was really wrong."

She rested her head on his shoulder and let out a sigh. "My mom got married the same month that she graduated." She told him. "I don't

wanna get married until I'm, like, twenty five."

"Okay."

"And I want to move somewhere special." She continued, "Like L.A. or Manhattan." Jane picked her head up so she could look at him. "Where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere but Indiana."

Jane smiled at him and wrapped her arms around his neck. "We should take a road trip over the summer or something." She said, "Just you and me, to get out of Hawkins for a little while, even if we don't go too far or stay too long."

"Do you think your mom would say yes to that?"

She shrugged. Mike could feel her fingers brushing against the back of his neck the same way they had only minutes before when they were dancing. "We could just lie and say the whole group is going. That might sway them a little."

He grinned at her. If they could get away with it this summer could easily be the best one yet. Even a few days totally alone with Jane had the potential to put a permanent smile on her face. The idea was a dream come true. "That sounds amazing."

She leaned towards him and pressed her lips against his. It was already hard enough to say goodbye to her at the end of the day. Mike already knew that it would be nearly impossible to say goodbye after spending a few days nonstop and totally alone with her.

They went inside a few minutes later and scanned the room for their friends. Jane spotted them first. The group was in line to get their picture taken in front of a backdrop by a teacher. He held onto her hand as they walked through the room in their direction. The line for pictures was over ten people long, each student eager to get such a professional looking photo. As they started to get closer Dustin was the first to notice them approaching. "There you guys are." He said, grabbing the attention of the others in the group. "And here we thought you were too busy making out in the parking lot to get in the

picture."

"We weren't making out in the parking lot." Jane said, her tone heavy with sarcasm. "We were making out in the bathroom."

Mike snorted at the look on his friends faces before they realized she was kidding. Their mouths hung open and their eyes went wide. Once the realization hit them they all let out a sigh of relief which was followed by Max muttering "Not funny." Under her breath

"Who do you think is going to be next?" Jane asked, looking over at Mike and speaking in the same sarcastic voice she had just used. "Stacey and Dylan or Max and Lucas?"

Out of the corner of his eye he could see blush instantly coating their two friends faces. "Max and Lucas." He answered, "Definitely."

Max pushed Jane's shoulder with just enough force to make her stumble for a split second. "Shut up." She grumbled while her face continued to turn as red as her hair. Lucas, on the other hand, stayed completely silent while his cheeks burned just as bright.

Their reactions only put a wide grin on Jane's face. She and Lizzie glanced at each other with a knowing look, giving Mike the feeling they too had talked about Max's possible feelings towards Lucas. Before anyone could say much more Mr. Callahan, who stood in front of the camera called "Next." Over his shoulder

xXx

They struggled to get everyone into the shot and only managed to do so with the help of Mr. Callahan who told them who was getting cut off. After trying out several arrangements Dustin, Will, and Lizzie opted to crouch down in front of the other four. Jane practically had to stand in front of Mike to stay in the shot. Which was totally fine with her once he wrapped his arms around her waist and held her close to his chest. She smiled wide and Mr. Callahan prepared to take the pictures, wide enough that her teeth were on display (which she hated doing). The flash went off and momentarily blinded her. It was a relief that she didn't have to worry if her smile looked genuine enough in a picture.

While he didn't seem thrilled about the idea of arranging for all seven of them to get a copy he did it anyway. He handed each of them the film, which they had to keep safe until Monday when they could get it developed by the photography club, who had generously volunteered to handle everyone's photographs. Jane doubted the process would be quick and was already anxiously awaiting her copy of the only picture she'd ever taken with her friends. She made a note to herself to get a photo copy of the picture so she could finally fulfill her promise to send Kelly a picture of Mike.

After realizing she didn't bring a purse to tuck her film safely away into a frown appeared on her face. She spotted Lizzie, who seemed to have the same issue, tuck it into her bra. After a moments hesitation and briefly wondering if getting sweaty would affect the film in any way she did the same. She kept her fingers crossed that the film would be fine despite the heightened temperature in the room. Jane followed the rest of the group back to their table, only getting halfway there before she heard someone's voice behind her.

"Jane!"

She turned around to find Jennifer Hayes and Melissa Duncan, who sat at a table in front of her in science, following her. Jane stopped along with the rest of the group who were just as curious as she was. The two girls looked at each other before Jennifer spoke up. "So, we were thinking- you know how the juniors don't have prom queen?"

"Yeah."

"Well we thought that was totally unfair." Melissa said. She wore a black and sequined dress with puffy shoulder pads in a remarkably similar shade of blue to Jane's dress.

"And if there were a junior prom queen it would *definitely* be you." Jennifer continued

"... It would?"

They nodded in unison like twins did in the movies. It was especially creepy considering the fact that two incredibly popular girls just told her she would *definitely* prom queen. "You deserve it more than

anyone after everything you've had to deal with."

Jane had no idea what to say. While she could provide a whole list of reasons why she didn't deserve to be prom queen she had never thought she would need to include her dad to the list. "Really?"

"Yeah." Jennifer moved her hand from behind her back and held out a small tiara towards her. "It's not much. But it's better than nothing."

She couldn't do anything but stare at the tiara in her hands. It was store bought, yes. Definitely made of plastic. But that wasn't what mattered to her. Jane was left speechless that not only did they think she deserved the title of prom queen but that they felt strongly enough about it to go out and buy her a tiara to give to her. She was, irrationally, afraid to touch it in case it turned to dust the second she did.

Sensing her shock Jennifer held it closer to her. "You're more real than any of the senior girls actually running for prom queen." She told her. "And you're really cool."

"Plus you're not in a totally cliché high-school-movie relationship that's totally nauseating." Melissa added with a quick glance at Mike next to her, "Which is more than can be said for, like, everyone else

Jane struggled to speak as if she had suddenly forgotten her 17 years of experience with the English language. "I- I don't know what to say."

"Then just take it and say something on Monday." Jennifer said, grabbing Jane's arm and putting the tiara in her hand. "Stay badass." She told her before the two girls turned their backs and disappeared into the crowd of dancing teens

As she once again faced her friends her eyes were glued on the tiara. She was only partially aware of the shocked expressions on their faces and Will whispering "Wow" to himself. Two of the most popular girls in her grade had unofficially crowned her prom queen. Yet she found herself unable to put the tiara on her head. Mike must have read her mind, in the way only he could, by the way he took it from her hands and put it on top of her head before she could wordlessly

stare at it much longer.

She couldn't help but mirror the smile on his face when she looked up at him. "They're right." He told her, "You deserve it."

"Holy shit." Dustin said, "Is there something in the water that's making all the popular kids go crazy?"

Lizzie shut her red-painted mouth that had been hanging open. "That was really freaky." She said, "But *really* awesome."

"I think I'm dreaming." Jane said, repeating Mike's previous words from the beginning on the night.

She truly did think she was dreaming. And she hoped she never woke up.

xXx

Hours later everyone in the group was changed into more comfortable clothes and dancing to music played on the radio in Lizzie's living room. Her parents were having dinner at a family friends house to give them some privacy, which was the very reason why Lizzie's house had been chosen to host the party. Around an hour and a half after everyone showed up she made the discovery that her parents had forgotten to lock up the liquor cabinet. It didn't take long for the bottles to be passed around the group several times.

The more time passed the more tipsy they all became. Max had loosened up enough to actually dance with Lucas in front of everyone else. Something Jane excitedly pointed out to Mike as they danced together on the other side of the room. The only one more drunk than her was Dustin, who seemed just about ready to pass out on the couch. As they danced to an upbeat pop song her hands were firmly planted on Mike's shoulders and her head hung down slightly. He had a feeling she held onto him so tightly to keep herself standing.

She looked up at him as the song started to wind down. "Can we go outside?"

"Yeah."

Mike kept an arm wrapped around her waist as he led out out to Lizzie's back patio. He remembered how terrified he had been the last time the two sat on the same steps. Scared not only by what he had just learned but how he suddenly wanted to make her father miserable. Looking back he recognized it as one of the first signs that he was falling in love with her. At the time he had been too worried about her to notice. Once they were sitting she rested her head on his shoulder and let out a small sigh.

"I love you, Mike." She told him. Her words were slurred from the alcohol she had drank but the words made his stomach flip none the less.

He kissed the top of her head. "I love you too."

Jane turned her head just enough so that she could look at him. Her eyes were slightly glazed and a bit unfocused. She searched his face, for what he wasn't sure, before she spoke again. "Like I really love you." She said. "Like I wanna marry you."

"Yeah?" He reminded himself that she was drunk. That she had already said a few things he doubted she meant. But it didn't change the fact that his face started to burn and his heart was beginning to pound.

She nodded. "Yeah." Jane put her hand on his other shoulder. "Do you wanna marry me?"

"Yeah of course." Mike mentally crossed his fingers that she was too drunk to remember their conversation the next morning.

Her lips spread into a wide smile. "Let's get married when we go on vacation over the summer." She said. "We just can't tell our parents."

"I thought you didn't want to get married until you were twenty five?" He asked

Jane frowned at him. "I don't know if I can wait that long."

He pushed her hair behind her ear. Mike wanted an uninterrupted view of her face. "I'll wait if you will."

"I don't want to." She protested. "What if you break up with me when we're like twenty two?"

Mike had to keep himself from laughing at her. "I won't. I promise."

"What if you change your mind?"

He shrugged. "You'll just have to trust me."

Jane once again searched his face as she mulled over the idea. The idea of running away and getting married as soon as they could was tempting. But the last thing he wanted was for her to regret anything they did. The night that Mike had the house to himself, and Jane lied and said Nancy would be home, it had taken her half an hour to convince him that she wouldn't regret him being her first. He didn't fully believe her but stopped protesting when he could see her getting annoyed. It wasn't until afterwards, as they lay tangled in his sheets and she wrapped her arms tightly around him, that she believed him.

She once again rested her head on his shoulder. "Fine." She said, though she didn't sound too happy about it. "I'll wait."

Mike knew that, statistically, the odds were stacked against their relationship working out. The rational and logical part of him whispered that he shouldn't sound so confident in his promise that they would wait. But the rest of him knew he had never loved anything the way he loved Jane. Every atom of his existence was deeply in love with her. He knew he would do anything for her. If she still wanted to get married the day they were both eighteen when she was sober he would gladly drive her to the court the day of his birthday. Mike had discovered the meaning of life since meeting Jane; to make her happy. The lengths he would go just to make her smile were dangerous. She had so much control over him and his emotions. But he hadn't cared in a long time.

29. Authors Note

Wow I can't believe this story has come to an end. This is the first multi chapter fix I have ever finished and is also the story I am, by fair, the most proud of. I know I say it almost every chapter but thank you so so much to everyone who has taken the time out of their day to read this story. Every review has made me smile ear to ear. The most amazing feeling in the world is getting a review or PM when I haven't updated in a few days asking when I'm going to upload. You guys have been my main motivation for continuing this story to the end.

multisabata gave me the idea to write this story in the opposite point of view (like writing a Jane chapter as Mike or a Mike chapter as Jane) which I love! I won't do the whole story over again but I will do a few chapters. Please feel free to request which chapters you want me to redo. Also let me know if you would like me to let you know when I upload the first edited chapter (they'll likely be a collection)

I'm also rewriting this story to make it 100% my own. It will be set in modern day and in my hometown and all of the characters will be just a little bit different. I don't know if I'll upload that version anywhere or if it will get published, which is my ultimate goal, but we'll see.

Once again thank you so so so so much for reading this story :)